HISTORY OF PAKISTAN

A Comprehensive Year-by-Year Account

1947 – 1960

From Independence to the Dawn of a New Decade

Covering: Politics • Governance • Economy • Military • Society • Foreign Relations

Foreword: The Birth of a Nation

Pakistan emerged on 14 August 1947 as one of the largest nations in the world by population — a homeland for the Muslims of the Indian subcontinent carved from the vast expanse of British India. Its creation was the culmination of decades of political struggle, communal negotiation, and ultimately the iron will of Mohammad Ali Jinnah and the All-India Muslim League. Yet independence brought with it an almost incomprehensible burden: two non-contiguous wings separated by over a thousand miles of Indian territory, millions of refugees surging across newly drawn borders, an administrative machinery built almost from scratch, and existential threats that would have tested any established state.

This document traces the history of Pakistan from the moment of its birth in August 1947 through the end of 1960 — thirteen turbulent years that would shape the country's character for generations to come. It is a story of heroism and tragedy, of visionary leadership and catastrophic missteps, of wars fought and crises narrowly averted. It is the story of a people who dared to build a new state against the odds.

Each year is treated in detail, examining the political landscape, economic conditions, military developments, social changes, and Pakistan's evolving relationships with the wider world. The narrative does not shy away from controversy or failure; an honest history must reckon with both triumph and error.

> *"Pakistan is not a dream. It is not an accident. It is a definite and definitive reality — born of the democratic will of the Muslim people of India." — Mohammad Ali Jinnah, 1947*

The period 1947–1960 can be divided broadly into three phases: the founding years (1947–1951) marked by the Quaid-e-Azam's leadership and sudden death, the subsequent scramble for political stability; the era of democratic experimentation and repeated constitutional crises (1952–1957); and finally the slide toward and entrenchment of military rule under General Ayub Khan (1958–1960). Together they form the essential foundation for understanding modern Pakistan.

1947 Independence, Partition, and the Founding of a Nation

The Road to Independence

The year 1947 stands as the most momentous in the history of South Asia. For over two centuries, the Indian subcontinent had been under British colonial rule. By the early twentieth century, two major political forces had emerged: the Indian National Congress, representing a broad nationalist vision with a predominantly Hindu leadership, and the All-India Muslim League, which under the guidance of Mohammad Ali Jinnah had evolved from a moderate organization into the principal voice of Muslim political aspirations.

The concept of Pakistan — a separate Muslim homeland — had gained popular expression in 1940 with the Lahore Resolution (also known as the Pakistan Resolution), passed at the Muslim League's annual session on 23 March 1940. The resolution called for the creation of 'independent states' in the northwestern and eastern zones of India where Muslims constituted a majority. Though the resolution did not explicitly use the word 'Pakistan,' it became the ideological lodestar of the Muslim League's demand.

Through the years of the Second World War and its aftermath, political negotiations between the Congress, the Muslim League, and the British government repeatedly broke down. The Cabinet Mission Plan of 1946, which proposed a loose federal structure for a united India, briefly offered hope, but deep mutual suspicion between Congress and the League — and differing interpretations of the plan's provisions — doomed it to failure. By early 1947, British patience was exhausted and violence between Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs was escalating across northern India.

Lord Louis Mountbatten arrived in India as the last Viceroy in March 1947 with a mandate to oversee the transfer of power. He quickly concluded that a united India was impossible and accelerated the timeline for British withdrawal. On 3 June 1947, the Mountbatten Plan announced the partition of British India into two independent dominions: India and Pakistan. The date of independence was set for August 1947, well ahead of the original June 1948 deadline.

14 August 1947: The Birth of Pakistan

Pakistan formally came into existence at midnight between 14 and 15 August 1947. The new state was inaugurated on 14 August, a day before India's independence, following the convention that the Viceroy would preside over Pakistan's ceremony first before traveling to Delhi. The ceremonies in Karachi — Pakistan's first capital — were suffused with a complex mixture of jubilation and anxiety.

Mohammad Ali Jinnah, now designated Governor-General of Pakistan, delivered his inaugural address to the Constituent Assembly of Pakistan on 11 August 1947, just days before formal independence. His speech was remarkable for its vision of a pluralistic, tolerant state in which religion would be a private matter and citizens of all faiths would be equal before the law. 'You are free,' Jinnah declared, 'you are free to go to your temples, you are free to go to your mosques or to any other place of worship in this State of Pakistan. You may belong to any religion or caste or creed — that has nothing to do with the business of the State.'

> *"We are starting in the days when there is no discrimination, no distinction between one community and another, no discrimination between one caste or creed and another. We are starting with this fundamental principle that we are all citizens and equal citizens of one State." — Quaid-e-Azam Mohammad Ali Jinnah, 11 August 1947*

Pakistan as born consisted of two geographically separate wings: West Pakistan, comprising the provinces of Punjab (West), Sindh, the North-West Frontier Province (NWFP), Balochistan, and several princely states; and East Pakistan, constituting the eastern portion of undivided Bengal. These two wings were separated by approximately 1,600 kilometers of Indian territory — a geographic anomaly that would have profound and ultimately fatal consequences for Pakistan's unity.

The Partition and the Great Migration

The birth of Pakistan was inseparable from one of the largest and most violent population transfers in human history. The Radcliffe Line — the boundary drawn by British lawyer Sir Cyril Radcliffe, who had never previously visited India — divided Punjab and Bengal in ways that satisfied neither community and left millions of people on the 'wrong' side of the border. The line was announced on 17 August 1947, three days after independence, adding to the chaos.

What followed was catastrophic. Between 12 and 20 million people were displaced as Hindus and Sikhs fled from Pakistani territory and Muslims streamed into the new state from India. The migrations were accompanied by horrific communal violence: massacres, abductions, mass rape, and arson. Estimates of the death toll range from 200,000 to over 2 million people, making the Partition one of the bloodiest events of the twentieth century.

The greatest violence occurred in Punjab, where Sikh, Hindu, and Muslim communities were most intermingled and where historic communal tensions were most acute. Entire villages were wiped out. Trains carrying refugees arrived at their destinations filled with corpses. The city of Lahore, which became part of Pakistan, saw its Hindu and Sikh majority neighborhoods emptied virtually overnight. Amritsar, on the Indian side, lost its Muslim population with equal brutality.

East Bengal experienced its own trauma, though the violence there was somewhat less acute in the immediate term. The partition of Bengal divided the culturally cohesive Bengali-speaking people between two states, separating Calcutta — the great commercial and cultural capital — from the majority of Bengal's Muslim population in the east.

Key Statistics: The Partition of 1947

Estimated displaced persons: 12–20 million | Estimated deaths: 200,000–2,000,000 | Refugees entering West Pakistan from India: ~6 million | Refugees entering East Pakistan from India: ~3 million | Population of Pakistan at independence (approx.): 75 million | Literacy rate at independence: approx. 14% | Length of border between Pakistan and India: over 3,000 km

The Administrative Challenge

Pakistan faced an administrative challenge of staggering proportions at independence. The new state inherited almost nothing. The British Indian administration had been headquartered in Delhi, which became India's capital. Pakistan had to build governmental machinery almost from zero. There were virtually no trained Muslim administrators in the higher civil services — the elite Indian Civil Service had been overwhelmingly Hindu and British. Military officers, doctors, engineers, lawyers, and teachers were in desperately short supply.

Karachi, chosen as the first capital, was a relatively modest port city utterly unprepared to serve as the nerve center of a nation of 75 million people. Government offices were set up in makeshift accommodations. Files and furniture were transported from Lahore and other cities. The entire treasury of the new state initially amounted to a mere 200 million rupees — a fraction of what was needed.

The division of British India's assets between India and Pakistan was contentious and often unfair to Pakistan. India retained the bulk of military equipment, financial reserves, and governmental infrastructure. Pakistan's share of the British Indian Army's materiel was delayed or, in some cases, never delivered. The two nations went to the dispute tribunal repeatedly in the first years of independence.

Despite these tremendous handicaps, the new government under Jinnah's firm direction managed to establish basic administrative structures with remarkable speed. The Secretariat was organized, ministries were formed, and the wheels of government began to turn — haltingly at first, but with increasing confidence as the weeks passed.

The Kashmir Crisis

Within weeks of independence, Pakistan faced its first military crisis — one that would define its relationship with India for decades to come. The princely state of Jammu and Kashmir, ruled by the Hindu Maharaja Hari Singh but with a predominantly Muslim population, had not acceded to either India or Pakistan by the time of independence. Its accession was legally and strategically crucial for both nations.

In October 1947, Pashtun tribal fighters from Pakistan's North-West Frontier Province — some with the tacit support of the Pakistani government and military — invaded Kashmir from the west, advancing rapidly toward Srinagar, the state capital. The Maharaja, alarmed by the invasion, signed the Instrument of Accession to India on 26 October 1947, and Indian troops were airlifted to Srinagar the following day.

The Kashmir war of 1947–1948 thus began. Indian and Pakistani forces, both only weeks old, clashed across the mountains and valleys of Kashmir. The fighting was bitter and inconclusive. On 1 January 1949, a United Nations-brokered ceasefire came into effect, leaving Pakistan in control of roughly one-third of Kashmir (termed 'Azad Kashmir' and the Northern Areas) and India in control of the remainder, including the Kashmir Valley. The UN resolutions called for a plebiscite to determine Kashmir's final status — a plebiscite that has never been held. The Kashmir dispute has remained the central flashpoint of India-Pakistan relations ever since.

Political Structure and Early Governance

Pakistan's political structure at independence was that of a parliamentary dominion within the British Commonwealth, modeled on the Westminster system. Jinnah served simultaneously as Governor-General and President of the Constituent Assembly — an unusual concentration of power that reflected both his unique stature and the desperate need for strong central leadership in the founding moment.

Liaquat Ali Khan, Jinnah's closest political associate, served as Prime Minister. The two men formed an effective partnership: Jinnah providing the ultimate authority and direction, Liaquat managing the day-to-day operations of government. The first cabinet was composed largely of Muslim League veterans, though it included representatives from minority communities as well.

The Constituent Assembly, which served both as Pakistan's parliament and as the body responsible for drafting a permanent constitution, was dominated by the Muslim League. However, the assembly also included representatives from Hindu, Christian, and Scheduled Caste communities, reflecting Jinnah's stated commitment to inclusive governance.

Economic Conditions in 1947

Pakistan inherited an extremely weak economic base. The areas that became West Pakistan were predominantly agricultural, producing wheat and cotton, but lacked significant industrial infrastructure. Calcutta, which fell to India, had been the commercial and industrial hub of undivided Bengal; East Pakistan was left with jute-producing farmland but no processing mills, most of which were located in West Bengal.

The immediate economic problems were acute: the government treasury was nearly empty, the banking system was in disarray (most banks had their headquarters in India), and the refugee crisis placed enormous burdens on public resources. The Reserve Bank of India initially continued to handle Pakistan's monetary affairs, an arrangement that Pakistan found intolerable and moved to end as quickly as possible — the State Bank of Pakistan was inaugurated by Jinnah himself on 1 July 1948.

Despite these difficulties, the government took steps to stabilize the economy. Emergency food distribution was organized, relief camps were established for refugees, and international assistance was sought. The United States and other Western nations were generally sympathetic to Pakistan's plight, and some aid began to flow in the final months of 1947.

1948 The Death of the Quaid and the Kashmir War

Jinnah's Declining Health

The year 1948 was dominated by a tragic reality that the government struggled to conceal from the public: Mohammad Ali Jinnah, the Quaid-e-Azam ('Great Leader'), was gravely ill. He had been suffering from tuberculosis and lung cancer for years, and the grueling work of the independence movement followed by the demands of running a new nation had taken an irreparable toll on his constitution.

Despite his illness, Jinnah continued to work with extraordinary dedication. He made an arduous tour of East Pakistan in March and April 1948, where he encountered strong sentiment for the recognition of Bengali as an official language alongside Urdu. In a speech in Dhaka, Jinnah firmly declared that Urdu and only Urdu would be the national language of Pakistan — a declaration that planted the seeds of what would later become a profound crisis in East Pakistan's relationship with the federal government.

Jinnah's health continued to deteriorate through the summer. He retreated to Quetta for rest, then to Ziarat, a cooler hill station in Balochistan, where he spent his final weeks. By late summer, he was barely able to function. The government carefully managed information about his condition, fearing that news of the Quaid's decline would destabilize the fragile young state.

11 September 1948: The Death of Jinnah

Mohammad Ali Jinnah died on 11 September 1948 in Karachi, just over thirteen months after Pakistan's independence. He was 71 years old. The news was announced to the nation and the world with a mixture of grief and shock that transcended political boundaries — even Pakistan's adversaries acknowledged the passing of one of the most formidable statesmen of the twentieth century.

The impact of Jinnah's death on Pakistan cannot be overstated. He had been not merely the head of state but the single unifying force holding together a fractious coalition of provincial interests, tribal loyalties, and political factions. His authority had been unquestioned; his will had been law. Without him, the political structure he had constructed was vulnerable in ways that would become painfully apparent in the years ahead.

> *"Few individuals significantly alter the course of history. Fewer still modify the map of the world. Hardly anyone can be credited with creating a nation-state. Mohammad Ali Jinnah did all three." — Stanley Wolpert, historian*

Khawaja Nazimuddin, formerly Chief Minister of Bengal and a conservative politician from East Pakistan, was appointed as the new Governor-General. Liaquat Ali Khan continued as Prime Minister. The transition of power was orderly, but the political center of gravity had shifted. The dominant personality that had kept competing interests in check was gone.

The Kashmir War Continues

Through 1948, the first Kashmir war ground on with neither side able to achieve a decisive victory. Pakistani forces — a combination of regular army units operating covertly and the Azad Kashmir forces — held their positions in the west of the state, while Indian forces consolidated control of the Vale of Kashmir and the areas around Srinagar. The fighting was characterized by difficult mountain terrain, supply line problems, and sporadic but often fierce engagements.

The United Nations Security Council was actively involved in the Kashmir dispute throughout 1948. Resolution 47, adopted in April 1948, called for a ceasefire and the holding of a free and impartial plebiscite to determine the future of the state. Pakistan accepted this framework; India did so conditionally. However, the implementation of the resolution required steps — including the withdrawal of Pakistani forces and tribesmen — that proved politically impossible for either side to take unilaterally.

The UN Commission for India and Pakistan (UNCIP) worked through the year to broker a ceasefire. Its efforts resulted in the Karachi Agreement of July 1949, which formalized the ceasefire line. But the plebiscite that was supposed to follow never materialized, leaving the dispute frozen in a state of armed standoff.

Establishment of the State Bank of Pakistan

One of the significant institutional milestones of 1948 was the establishment of the State Bank of Pakistan, inaugurated by Jinnah on 1 July. Pakistan had initially relied on the Reserve Bank of India to manage its monetary affairs — an arrangement deeply unsatisfactory to Pakistan's leadership. The creation of an independent central bank was essential for issuing currency, managing foreign exchange reserves, and establishing Pakistan's economic sovereignty.

Jinnah delivered an important address at the inauguration of the State Bank, articulating his vision of an Islamic economic system that he hoped the Bank would help develop — one that was not based on interest (riba, prohibited in Islamic law) and that promoted equitable distribution of wealth. This vision remained largely aspirational in the short term, as Pakistan adopted a broadly conventional banking system, but it foreshadowed later debates about Islamic economics.

The Language Controversy Emerges

The language question — which language or languages should serve as Pakistan's official medium — emerged as a serious political issue in 1948. The Muslim League leadership, dominated by politicians from West Pakistan and Urdu-speaking Muslim migrants (muhajirs) from India, had long promoted Urdu as the natural national language of a Muslim state. Urdu, though the mother tongue of only a small minority of Pakistanis, had deep associations with Muslim cultural identity in the subcontinent.

East Pakistan, however, was home to over half of Pakistan's total population, and virtually all of them spoke Bengali as their mother tongue. Bengali was a language of rich literary tradition, the language of Rabindranath Tagore and countless other poets and writers. East Pakistani politicians and intellectuals demanded that Bengali be given co-official status alongside Urdu. Jinnah's firm rejection of this demand in March 1948 had stung deeply, and the issue continued to fester throughout the year.

The language controversy was not merely a linguistic dispute; it was fundamentally a question of power and representation. If Urdu alone was the official language, East Pakistani civil servants who were not fluent in Urdu would be disadvantaged in the government. It reflected a broader pattern of West Pakistani political and economic dominance that East Pakistan resented deeply.

1949 Political Consolidation and the Objectives Resolution

Political Landscape After Jinnah

By 1949, the absence of Jinnah's commanding presence was becoming increasingly apparent in Pakistan's political life. The Muslim League, which had been the vehicle of the independence movement, now faced the challenge of transforming itself from a liberation movement into a governing party. It had no political competition of consequence — opposition parties were weak and fragmented — but its internal cohesion was already showing cracks.

Prime Minister Liaquat Ali Khan was an able administrator and statesman, but he lacked Jinnah's personal authority and the ability to override factional interests with the force of his personality. The Muslim League was divided along provincial lines, with politicians from Punjab, Sindh, NWFP, Balochistan, and East Bengal pursuing their own regional interests. The central government found it increasingly difficult to impose a unified national agenda.

Governor-General Khawaja Nazimuddin was a decent and pious man but lacked political acumen and executive drive. The division of authority between the Governor-General and the Prime Minister was not clearly defined in the absence of a permanent constitution, creating ambiguity that opportunistic politicians would later exploit.

The Objectives Resolution

One of the most consequential political developments of 1949 was the passage of the Objectives Resolution on 12 March by the Constituent Assembly. Moved by Prime Minister Liaquat Ali Khan, the resolution laid out the foundational principles that would guide Pakistan's future constitution. It declared that sovereignty over the entire universe belonged to Allah alone, and that the authority exercised by the people of Pakistan was a sacred trust. It committed the state to democratic principles, equality, justice, and freedom, and to providing conditions in which Muslims could order their lives in accordance with Islamic teachings.

The Objectives Resolution was a landmark document that sought to reconcile Islamic principles with democratic governance. Critics — particularly from minority communities and liberal circles — argued that placing sovereignty in the hands of God rather than the people undermined the democratic basis of the state. Supporters argued that the resolution was a natural expression of Pakistan's identity as a Muslim state and that it was consistent with democratic values properly understood.

The Objectives Resolution has remained a point of controversy in Pakistan's constitutional history. It was made a substantive part of the 1973 constitution by General Zia ul-Haq in 1985 and remains in force today, continuing to generate debate about the relationship between religion and the state in Pakistan.

Relations with India: The Ceasefire in Kashmir

The most important development in Pakistan-India relations in 1949 was the formal ceasefire in Kashmir, which came into effect on 1 January 1949. The Karachi Agreement in July established the Ceasefire Line (CFL) that divided the former princely state between Indian and Pakistani control. Both sides were required to maintain their forces behind this line. The UN Military Observer Group in India and Pakistan (UNMOGIP) was established to monitor the ceasefire.

With the shooting war over, diplomacy took center stage. But the fundamental dispute remained: who had sovereignty over Kashmir? India maintained that the Maharaja's accession was legal and final. Pakistan argued that since the population was predominantly Muslim, the principle of self-determination required a plebiscite. The UN resolutions supported the plebiscite option, but neither country moved to implement the conditions that would make it possible.

The Kashmir dispute poisoned the broader relationship between the two new nations. Trade, travel, and communication across the border were severely restricted. The two countries were effectively already locked in a cold war, with occasional flare-ups of hostility, less than two years after independence.

Economic Developments

Pakistan's economy in 1949 faced both structural challenges and immediate crises. The country was overwhelmingly agrarian, with agriculture accounting for the great majority of employment and economic output. The main cash crops were cotton (in West Pakistan) and jute (in East Pakistan), both heavily dependent on export markets. The absence of significant domestic industry meant that Pakistan had to import virtually all manufactured goods.

The most serious economic crisis of 1949 was triggered by India's decision to devalue the rupee following sterling devaluation in September, while Pakistan chose not to devalue its own rupee. This created a significant exchange rate differential that effectively halted trade between the two countries — a grave problem for East Pakistan, whose jute growers depended on Indian mills to process their harvest. The trade standoff lasted for several months, causing considerable hardship, before being resolved through bilateral negotiations.

On the positive side, the government was making steady progress in building up basic economic institutions. The State Bank of Pakistan was functioning. A planning commission was established to coordinate economic development. Pakistan was admitted to the World Bank and International Monetary Fund, giving it access to international financial resources.

1950 Diplomacy, Demography, and Domestic Tensions

The Liaquat-Nehru Pact

One of the most significant diplomatic achievements of 1950 was the Liaquat-Nehru Pact (formally the Delhi Pact), signed on 8 April 1950 by Prime Ministers Liaquat Ali Khan and Jawaharlal Nehru. The pact was a response to escalating communal violence in both countries, particularly in Bengal, where riots in East Pakistan had triggered retaliatory attacks on Hindus in West Bengal and vice versa, threatening a new wave of mass migration and potentially another war.

The pact committed both governments to protect minorities within their respective territories, guarantee their rights as citizens, provide compensation for property losses suffered during communal violence, and allow those who had migrated due to fear to return to their homes. It was a remarkable document — an acknowledgment by both governments that they bore responsibility for the safety of their minority populations.

The Liaquat-Nehru Pact had mixed results in practice. Some of its provisions were implemented; others were not. The flow of Hindu migrants from East Pakistan and Muslim migrants from India continued, though at a lower tempo than in 1947. However, the pact was significant as a demonstration that India and Pakistan could negotiate and reach agreements, and it temporarily reduced tensions in Bengal.

Liaquat Ali Khan's Visit to the United States

In May 1950, Prime Minister Liaquat Ali Khan made a landmark visit to the United States — the first by a Pakistani head of government. The visit was of great symbolic importance, signaling Pakistan's orientation toward the Western bloc in the emerging Cold War. Liaquat was received warmly in Washington, addressed a joint session of Congress, and met President Truman.

Pakistan's Cold War alignment was emerging from a combination of strategic calculation and ideological affinity. The Muslim League's leadership was broadly pro-Western and anti-communist. Pakistan also needed American military and economic assistance that it could not obtain from neutral or non-aligned sources. The Soviet Union, meanwhile, had close ties with India and showed little interest in supporting Pakistan's position on Kashmir.

The visit resulted in increased American interest in Pakistan as a potential ally in the Cold War. This interest would eventually crystallize into a formal alliance (the 1954 Mutual Defense Assistance Agreement), which would give Pakistan military aid but also deepen its dependence on American strategic decisions.

Population and Refugee Issues

By 1950, roughly three years after independence, Pakistan was still grappling with the consequences of the mass migration triggered by Partition. Millions of refugees (muhajirs) had entered West Pakistan from India, and their resettlement remained an ongoing challenge. Many were educated, urban, and professional — former residents of Delhi, Lucknow, Bombay, and other Indian cities who brought skills but also needed jobs, housing, and economic opportunities.

The government established a Rehabilitation Ministry to manage the resettlement process. Abandoned Hindu and Sikh properties in Pakistan were allocated to Muslim refugees, a process that was messy and frequently unjust. But over time, many muhajir families did establish themselves, particularly in Karachi and other Sindhi cities. Karachi, transformed from a modest port into a teeming metropolis by the refugee influx, was experiencing dramatic urban growth.

In East Pakistan, the refugee situation was different. The Hindu exodus from East Pakistan continued at a steady pace through the late 1940s and 1950s, driven by communal insecurity, economic hardship, and official and unofficial pressure. This demographic shift would have long-term consequences for East Pakistan's social composition and its relationship with the Hindu minority.

Constitutional Deliberations

The Constituent Assembly continued its work on a permanent constitution throughout 1950, but progress was painfully slow. The fundamental questions of what kind of state Pakistan should be — Islamic or secular, federal or unitary, parliamentary or presidential — remained deeply contested. The Objectives Resolution of 1949 had established certain principles, but their practical implementation in constitutional provisions was far from agreed.

The relationship between the two wings of Pakistan was among the most contentious issues. East Pakistan, with its larger population, demanded proportional representation in the national parliament, which would have given it a majority. West Pakistan resisted this, fearing Bengali political dominance. This fundamental tension — between the demographic weight of East Pakistan and the political and economic power of West Pakistan — would recur throughout the constitutional debates and beyond.

1951 Assassination, Crisis, and the Rawalpindi Conspiracy

The Rawalpindi Conspiracy

In March 1951, Pakistani authorities uncovered what became known as the Rawalpindi Conspiracy — a plot by a group of army officers and leftist civilians to overthrow the government and establish a socialist regime. The plot, inspired partly by admiration for the Soviet model and partly by frustration with what the conspirators saw as an incompetent and corrupt civilian government, was a watershed moment in Pakistan's civil-military relations.

The principal military figure in the conspiracy was Major General Akbar Khan, the Chief of General Staff, along with several other senior officers. Among the civilians involved were prominent leftist figures including the poet Faiz Ahmed Faiz, considered one of the great Urdu poets of the twentieth century. The conspirators were arrested, tried in secret military trials, and sentenced to varying prison terms.

The Rawalpindi Conspiracy revealed several disturbing truths about Pakistan's young state: the military was already beginning to see itself as a potential political actor; leftist and progressive ideas had significant support among the educated elite; and the civilian government's legitimacy was questioned by significant segments of the population. It was a harbinger of the military interventions that would follow.

16 October 1951: The Assassination of Liaquat Ali Khan

The most shocking event of 1951 — and one of the most consequential in Pakistan's entire history — was the assassination of Prime Minister Liaquat Ali Khan on 16 October. He was shot while addressing a large public meeting at Company Bagh (now Liaquat Bagh) in Rawalpindi. The assassin, one Said Akbar Babrak, was himself immediately shot dead by a police officer, eliminating the most obvious source of information about the conspiracy.

Liaquat Ali Khan died of his wounds, becoming Pakistan's first political martyr after Jinnah. He had been the second-most important figure in the founding of Pakistan, a skilled diplomat (he had negotiated with Mountbatten and represented Pakistan at the United Nations), and a capable administrator who had held the government together in the difficult years after Jinnah's death.

The circumstances of the assassination have never been fully clarified. The immediate investigation was botched — the killing of the shooter ensured that no full account of the conspiracy could be established. Subsequent investigations and inquiries have pointed to various possible masterminds,

including domestic political rivals, foreign intelligence services, and feudal interests threatened by Liaquat's proposed agrarian reforms. The truth remains obscured.

The political consequences of the assassination were enormous. Pakistan lost its most experienced civilian leader at a critical moment in its development. The period of stable, visionary civilian government effectively ended with Liaquat's death. What followed was a decade of political instability, revolving-door prime ministers, and ultimately military rule.

Political Fallout: Nazimuddin Becomes Prime Minister

Following Liaquat's assassination, Governor-General Ghulam Mohammad (who had replaced Nazimuddin as Governor-General) appointed Khawaja Nazimuddin as the new Prime Minister. This decision was controversial and arguably constitutionally questionable — Nazimuddin had been serving as Governor-General, and his appointment as Prime Minister strengthened the precedent of the Governor-General exercising discretionary power in the selection of prime ministers.

Nazimuddin was a pious and decent man but not a strong political leader. His government would face multiple crises over the following years. The real power in Pakistani politics was shifting — not to elected politicians, but to the civil and military bureaucracy, and particularly to the Governor-General himself, the formidable Ghulam Mohammad.

1952 Constitutional Crisis and Language Movement

The Bengali Language Movement Erupts

The simmering language controversy in East Pakistan exploded into violence in February 1952, in events that have become central to Pakistani — and Bangladeshi — national memory. On 21 February 1952, students at the University of Dhaka and other institutions staged demonstrations demanding official recognition of Bengali alongside Urdu. The government, under Nazimuddin, refused and imposed Section 144 prohibiting public gatherings.

When students defied the ban and marched, police opened fire on the crowd, killing at least four students — Abul Barkat, Rafiquddin Ahmed, Abul Jabbar, and Shafiur Rahman — whose names have been inscribed in Bengali national consciousness as martyrs. Many more were injured. News of the killings sparked outrage across East Pakistan, with strikes, demonstrations, and riots erupting in Dhaka and other cities.

The killings of 21 February 1952 — Ekushey February in Bengali — became one of the foundational events of Bengali nationalism. The Shaheed Minar (Martyrs' Monument) built in Dhaka to commemorate the victims became a national shrine. The date was eventually recognized by UNESCO in 1999 as International Mother Language Day, observed worldwide. In the short term, the movement forced the government to acknowledge Bengali's importance, though formal co-official status would not be granted for several more years.

Constitutional Impasse

The Constituent Assembly continued to grapple with the constitutional question throughout 1952 without resolution. The main sticking points remained: the role of Islam in the constitution, the distribution of powers between the center and the provinces, and the representation formula that would determine the balance between East and West Pakistan.

The 'One Unit' concept — the idea of merging all of West Pakistan's provinces into a single administrative unit to balance East Pakistan — was being discussed but had not yet been implemented. Its proponents argued that it would reduce provincial rivalries and simplify the constitutional structure; its opponents argued that it was a device to concentrate power in the hands of Punjab-dominated West Pakistani bureaucracy.

Economic Challenges

Pakistan's economy in 1952 faced serious difficulties. The Korean War boom of 1950–1951, which had briefly inflated prices for Pakistan's cotton and jute exports, was over, and commodity prices fell sharply. Foreign exchange reserves declined. The government was forced to introduce austerity measures and cut public spending.

The imbalance between East and West Pakistan in the distribution of economic resources was becoming a major political issue. East Pakistan generated the majority of Pakistan's foreign exchange through its jute exports, but the revenues were largely spent in West Pakistan on industrial development, infrastructure, and the federal government. East Pakistani politicians argued with increasing vehemence that their region was being exploited by the center — an argument that would only grow louder over the following decade.

1953 Anti-Ahmadiyya Riots and Political Upheaval

The Anti-Ahmadiyya Movement and Riots

The most dramatic domestic crisis of 1953 was the anti-Ahmadiyya movement, which culminated in widespread riots in Punjab in February and March. The Ahmadiyya community, founded in the late nineteenth century by Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, was considered by many mainstream Muslims to be outside the pale of Islam because of its founder's claims to prophethood — a status that orthodox Islam reserved exclusively for Muhammad. The religious establishment and particularly the Jamaat-e-Islami party of Maulana Maududi had been demanding that Ahmadis be declared non-Muslims and that the Foreign Minister, Sir Zafarullah Khan, an Ahmadi, be removed from office.

When the government refused these demands, organized violence broke out in Lahore and other Punjab cities. Ahmadi properties were attacked, shops were looted, and lives were lost. The scale of the violence shocked the government and the outside world. Martial law was declared in Lahore for the first time — a fateful precedent that would normalize the use of military force to restore domestic order.

General Azam Khan was appointed as the administrator of martial law in Lahore, and the army restored order with considerable firmness. A judicial inquiry commission was established under Chief Justice Muhammad Munir of the West Pakistan High Court. The Munir Commission Report, published in 1954, was a landmark document — a scathing analysis of religious extremism and political manipulation that asked the piercing question: if Pakistan was to be an Islamic state, which sect's version of Islam would define it?

> *"Keeping in view the several definitions given by the ulama, need we make any comment except that no two learned divines are agreed on this fundamental? If we attempt our own definition as each learned divine has done and that definition differs from that given by all others, we unanimously go out of the fold of Islam. And if we adopt the definition given by any one of the ulama, we remain Muslims according to the view of that alim but kafirs according to the definition of every other alim." — Munir Commission Report, 1954*

Dismissal of Nazimuddin

In April 1953, Governor-General Ghulam Mohammad took the extraordinary step of dismissing Prime Minister Khawaja Nazimuddin, even though Nazimuddin commanded a majority in the Constituent Assembly. This act was constitutionally questionable at best — in a parliamentary system, a prime minister with a parliamentary majority cannot simply be dismissed by the head of state. But Ghulam

Mohammad justified his action on grounds of Nazimuddin's failure to manage the economic crisis and the anti-Ahmadiyya riots.

In place of Nazimuddin, Ghulam Mohammad appointed Mohammad Ali Bogra, Pakistan's Ambassador to the United States and a relatively obscure figure with little domestic political base, as the new Prime Minister. Bogra's appointment was possible only because of the Governor-General's willingness to override constitutional conventions. It established a pattern that would repeat: a strong Governor-General using his office's residual powers to control the selection of prime ministers and subordinate the elected legislature.

The dismissal of Nazimuddin marked a decisive moment in the erosion of Pakistan's parliamentary democracy. The lesson drawn — that a prime minister's position depended on the Governor-General's confidence, not just that of the assembly — fundamentally altered the political dynamic. Politicians began to court the Governor-General rather than the electorate.

Mohammad Ali Bogra and the Bogra Formula

Mohammad Ali Bogra, despite his limited domestic experience, proved a more nimble politician than expected. Recognizing the urgent need to make progress on the constitutional question, he put forward in October 1953 what became known as the Bogra Formula for representation in the national legislature. The formula attempted to balance East Pakistan's numerical majority against West Pakistani concerns by creating a bicameral legislature in which both chambers would need to concur on legislation.

The Bogra Formula received a mixed reception. East Pakistani politicians thought it did not adequately reflect their region's demographic majority; West Pakistani politicians worried that it gave too much weight to the eastern wing. Nevertheless, it represented genuine progress in the constitutional conversation and temporarily reduced the political temperature.

1954 Military Alliance and the One Unit Scheme

The US-Pakistan Mutual Defense Agreement

Pakistan's Cold War alignment with the United States was formalized in 1954 through the Mutual Defense Assistance Agreement signed on 19 May. This agreement committed the United States to providing military equipment, training, and assistance to Pakistan's armed forces. It was followed by Pakistan's membership in two US-sponsored regional defense organizations: the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) in September 1954 and the Baghdad Pact (later CENTO — Central Treaty Organization) in 1955.

The military alliance with the United States had profound consequences for Pakistan. On the positive side, it brought a massive influx of military hardware — tanks, aircraft, artillery, warships — that dramatically modernized Pakistan's armed forces. It also brought economic assistance and political support in international forums.

On the negative side, the alliance deepened the military's already considerable political influence. An institution that was now receiving enormous resources and American backing was not going to confine itself quietly to the barracks. The alliance also alarmed India, which deepened its own relationship with the Soviet Union in response, intensifying the Cold War dimension of South Asian rivalry.

Many Pakistani politicians and intellectuals were deeply ambivalent about the American alliance. They worried that it would compromise Pakistan's sovereignty, entangle it in Cold War conflicts that were not its own, and antagonize potential friends in the Muslim world and among non-aligned nations. These concerns were well-founded, as events in subsequent decades would demonstrate.

East Pakistan Elections: Muslim League Routed

The provincial elections held in East Pakistan in March 1954 delivered a devastating verdict on the Muslim League. The United Front, a coalition of opposition parties dominated by the Awami League of Hussain Shaheed Suhrawardy and the Krishak Sramik Party of A.K. Fazlul Huq, won an overwhelming majority, winning 223 of 309 seats. The Muslim League was virtually wiped out, winning only 10 seats.

The scale of the defeat was a political earthquake. The Muslim League had never contested a free election in East Pakistan before (independence had come before such elections were held), and its comprehensive rejection revealed the depth of East Pakistani alienation from the central

government. The United Front's manifesto centered on autonomy for East Pakistan and recognition of Bengali as a state language — issues that resonated powerfully with East Bengali voters.

Fazlul Huq, a veteran politician of the independence movement and one of the movers of the original Lahore Resolution of 1940, became Chief Minister of East Pakistan. But his government was short-lived. In May 1954, during a visit to Calcutta, Huq made comments that were interpreted (or misrepresented) as suggesting East Pakistan should reunite with West Bengal. The central government used this as a pretext to impose Governor's Rule in East Pakistan, dismissing the elected government. It was another blow to democracy.

The One Unit Scheme

In late 1954, the central government moved forward with the 'One Unit' scheme — the consolidation of all four provinces of West Pakistan (Punjab, Sindh, NWFP, and Balochistan) along with various tribal areas and princely states into a single administrative unit called 'West Pakistan.' The scheme was implemented on 14 October 1955.

The official justification was that One Unit would reduce administrative duplication, eliminate provincial parochialism, and create a counterweight to East Pakistan's numerical majority. The political reality was that it served the interests of Punjab-dominated West Pakistani bureaucracy and the central government. By creating a single West Pakistan, the Bogra Formula's provisions would apply to two units — East Pakistan and West Pakistan — rather than to East Pakistan on one side and four separate provinces on the other.

The scheme was deeply unpopular in Sindh, NWFP, and Balochistan, which felt their identities and autonomy were being submerged by the larger Punjab. It generated lasting resentments that would fuel regional separatist movements for decades. The One Unit scheme was eventually abolished in 1970, but the scars it left on Pakistani federalism persisted.

1955 Constitutional Progress and Political Maneuvering

Ghulam Mohammad's Dismissal of the Constituent Assembly

In October 1954, Governor-General Ghulam Mohammad had taken an even more drastic step than dismissing a prime minister: he had dissolved the Constituent Assembly itself. His stated justification was that the assembly had become unrepresentative and self-perpetuating — it had been elected in 1946 and its members had never faced the electorate. The real motivation was that the assembly was on the verge of passing constitutional amendments that would have drastically curtailed the Governor-General's powers.

The dissolution of the Constituent Assembly was challenged in the courts. The Federal Court of Pakistan initially ruled it unconstitutional in a landmark judgment by Chief Justice Munir — but then reversed course and ultimately upheld the Governor-General's action on grounds of necessity, applying the doctrine of state necessity (borrowed from Pakistani jurisprudence via H.M. Seervai). This judicial reversal was a grievous blow to constitutional governance and established a precedent for validating extra-constitutional actions that would haunt Pakistan for generations.

A new Constituent Assembly was indirectly elected in 1955 and set to work on completing the constitution. This body, working under the shadow of the One Unit scheme and aware of the Governor-General's willingness to dismiss inconvenient institutions, operated in a fundamentally different political atmosphere than its predecessor.

Iskander Mirza Becomes Governor-General

Ghulam Mohammad's health had been deteriorating severely — he suffered from aphasia that made communication increasingly difficult. In August 1955, Iskander Mirza replaced him as Governor-General. Mirza was a former soldier turned administrator who had served as Minister of the Interior. He was intelligent, politically sophisticated, and deeply cynical about civilian politicians and the democratic process.

Iskander Mirza would dominate Pakistani politics from 1955 to 1958. He became Pakistan's first President when the country became a republic in 1956. His approach to politics was thoroughly Machiavellian — he rotated prime ministers, played factions off against each other, and generally managed Pakistani politics as a personal chess game. His relationship with the military, particularly with General Ayub Khan, the Commander-in-Chief, would ultimately determine both their fates.

Pakistan at the Bandung Conference

In April 1955, Pakistan participated in the Asia-Africa Conference held in Bandung, Indonesia — the landmark gathering of newly independent Asian and African nations that gave birth to the Non-Aligned Movement. Pakistan's attendance was somewhat awkward given its recently formalized military alliance with the United States, which put it at odds with the neutralism championed by India's Nehru, Indonesia's Sukarno, and Egypt's Nasser.

Pakistani diplomats worked to present Pakistan as a member of the broader community of developing nations while defending its alliance with the West as consistent with Pakistan's sovereign choices. The tension between Pakistan's Western alignment and its desire for good relations with the Muslim world and the non-aligned camp would be a persistent feature of its foreign policy.

1956 Pakistan Becomes an Islamic Republic

The Constitution of 1956

After nearly nine years of deliberation, Pakistan finally adopted its first constitution on 23 March 1956 — a date subsequently celebrated as Pakistan Day. The constitution declared Pakistan an Islamic Republic, established a parliamentary system of government with a bicameral legislature, and provided for fundamental rights. The federal structure created two units: East Pakistan and West Pakistan (as established by the One Unit scheme).

The constitution incorporated the principles of the Objectives Resolution, making Islam the state religion while also guaranteeing religious freedom for minorities. It provided for a President as head of state (to be elected by the combined parliament) and a Prime Minister as head of government, responsible to the National Assembly. The distribution of powers between the center and the provinces gave the center overwhelming dominance.

The constitution was a significant achievement — Pakistan had taken its time, but it had produced a document that at least on paper provided a framework for democratic governance. The problem was that the political culture in which it would operate had already been corrupted by years of Governor-General interference, dismissed governments, and unconstitutional maneuvers. The constitution of 1956 would last barely two and a half years before being abrogated by military coup.

Iskander Mirza: Pakistan's First President

With the promulgation of the 1956 constitution, Pakistan transitioned from a dominion with a Governor-General to a republic with a President. Iskander Mirza was sworn in as Pakistan's first President on 23 March 1956. The President under the new constitution had significant powers, including the ability to appoint and dismiss the Prime Minister and, in certain circumstances, dissolve the National Assembly — powers that Mirza would exercise with reckless abandon.

Between 1956 and 1958, Mirza appointed and dismissed four prime ministers: Chaudhry Mohammad Ali (replaced by Suhrawardy in September 1956), Hussain Shaheed Suhrawardy (dismissed in October 1957), Ismail Ibrahim Chundrigar (dismissed after only two months), and Feroz Khan Noon (who held office until the coup). This revolving door of prime ministers paralyzed governance and destroyed whatever credibility civilian politicians still possessed.

Hussain Shaheed Suhrawardy as Prime Minister

Of the prime ministers of this period, Hussain Shaheed Suhrawardy is perhaps the most significant. A veteran Bengali politician who had played a complex role during the 1946 communal violence as Chief Minister of Bengal, Suhrawardy was by the mid-1950s the leader of the Awami League and a powerful voice for East Pakistani rights. He served as Prime Minister from September 1956 to October 1957.

Suhrawardy was an effective prime minister who attempted to address East Pakistan's grievances and modernize Pakistan's foreign policy. He maintained the Western alliance while trying to improve relations with Muslim countries and expand Pakistan's diplomatic horizons. His government made genuine efforts to address economic disparities between the two wings.

However, Suhrawardy's tenure demonstrated the impossibility of sustaining effective governance in the political environment created by Mirza's machinations. Suhrawardy's coalition was inherently unstable, and when he was unable to secure a majority in the National Assembly (which had been indirectly elected and did not represent the results of the East Pakistan 1954 elections), Mirza dismissed him.

Suez Crisis and Pakistan's Foreign Policy

The Suez Crisis of 1956 — when Britain, France, and Israel attacked Egypt after Nasser nationalized the Suez Canal — presented Pakistan with a delicate diplomatic challenge. As a member of the Baghdad Pact alongside Britain, Pakistan had formal treaty commitments, but as a Muslim country, it felt natural solidarity with Egypt. Pakistan ultimately condemned the attack on Egypt while trying to preserve its relationships with both Britain and the Muslim world — a difficult balancing act that illustrated the tensions inherent in its foreign policy position.

1957 Political Paralysis and Economic Stagnation

The Revolving Door Continues

The political paralysis of 1957 was extraordinary even by the standards Pakistan had established. Suhrawardy's dismissal in October was followed by the brief tenure of Ismail Ibrahim Chundrigar, who lasted only two months before Mirza replaced him with Feroz Khan Noon in December. Four prime ministers in less than two years — the Pakistani state had become ungovernable through normal political means.

The National Assembly, elected indirectly and lacking genuine popular legitimacy, was consumed by factional maneuvering. Political parties formed and broke alliances on a weekly basis. Floor-crossing — members of parliament switching parties for personal or financial gain — was rampant. The deliberative function of the legislature had essentially ceased; no significant legislation was passed, no important policy decisions were made. Government was at a standstill.

The Muslim League, once the party of independence and national aspiration, had fragmented into competing factions. The Awami League, Pakistan National Party, Republican Party, and numerous smaller groupings occupied the political landscape without any of them able to form a stable majority. The general public was increasingly disgusted with democratic politics — a sentiment that Mirza and the military were able to exploit.

Economic Performance

Despite the political chaos, Pakistan's economy showed some positive trends in the latter half of the 1950s. American aid, both military and economic, was flowing in substantial quantities. The First Five Year Plan (1955–1960) was being implemented with some success, though its targets were only partially met. Industrial output was growing, albeit from a very low base. The Karachi metropolitan area was rapidly expanding as an industrial and commercial center.

The fundamental structural problem remained: the gap between East and West Pakistan was growing, not shrinking. East Pakistan, generating most of the foreign exchange through jute exports, was receiving a disproportionately small share of development expenditure. West Pakistan's industrial base was growing; East Pakistan's was barely getting started. The political elite in Karachi and Lahore showed little urgency about addressing this imbalance.

Civil Society and Culture

Despite — or perhaps because of — the political turmoil, Pakistan's civil society and cultural life showed considerable vitality in the 1950s. Urdu literature flourished, with writers like Saadat Hasan Manto, Ismat Chughtai, and Qurratul Ain Hyder producing works of enduring significance. The film industry in Lahore (Lollywood) was developing, producing Urdu and Punjabi language films that reached large audiences.

In East Pakistan, Bengali cultural life was also vibrant, with strong traditions in literature, music, and theatre. The cultural vitality of East Pakistan was closely intertwined with its political consciousness — Bengali cultural expression was a form of political assertion against the cultural hegemony of Urdu-speaking West Pakistani elites.

Radio Pakistan, established at independence, had become a significant medium for both entertainment and public information. The press, in Urdu and English, was active and relatively free — though subject to occasional government pressure. Pakistan had a genuine tradition of vigorous newspaper debate that persisted even through its political difficulties.

1958 Military Coup: The End of Democracy

The Buildup to the Coup

By 1958, Pakistan's political system had reached a point of near-total dysfunction. The National Assembly was paralyzed, governments came and went with dizzying speed, corruption was widespread, and the public had lost confidence in civilian politicians. President Iskander Mirza was openly contemptuous of democratic processes and increasingly disposed toward a more direct assertion of executive power.

General Mohammad Ayub Khan, Commander-in-Chief of the Pakistan Army since 1951, had been watching the political deterioration with growing impatience. Ayub Khan was an imposing figure — tall, physically commanding, a product of the British Indian Army's martial culture — who believed that Pakistan needed strong, stable government rather than the chaos of parliamentary democracy. He had already prepared plans for a military takeover, waiting for the right moment.

That moment came in October 1958. The immediate triggers were multiple: a brawl on the floor of the East Pakistan Assembly in which the Deputy Speaker was badly injured; continued political deadlock in the National Assembly; and the accumulation of Mirza's own frustrations with the political class he had himself helped to corrupt.

7 October 1958: Martial Law

On 7 October 1958, President Iskander Mirza abrogated the constitution, dissolved the National Assembly and provincial assemblies, banned all political parties, and declared martial law. General Ayub Khan was appointed Chief Martial Law Administrator. The announcement was made on Radio Pakistan in the middle of the night, and by morning the army was in effective control of the country.

Mirza's proclamation cited the 'complete chaos and uncertainty' prevailing in the country and the failure of politicians to serve the national interest. He promised that martial law would be brief — a transitional measure to stabilize the country before a return to democratic governance. These promises would prove hollow, as they always do.

The initial public reaction to the coup was not uniformly negative. Many Pakistanis, exhausted by the political farce of the previous years, welcomed the prospect of stable government. Businessmen hoped for predictable economic policies. Some intellectuals believed that a temporary period of firm government might allow institutional rebuilding. This acquiescence — even enthusiasm — for military rule was a deeply troubling sign of how much confidence in democracy had eroded.

Mirza Sidelined: Ayub Takes Full Power

The cohabitation between Mirza and Ayub was never stable. Within three weeks of the coup, Ayub moved decisively to consolidate sole power. On 27 October 1958, Mirza was forced to resign and was flown into exile in London, where he would eventually die in 1969. Ayub Khan became both President and Chief Martial Law Administrator, concentrating all power in his own hands.

The speed with which Ayub removed Mirza demonstrated that the military coup had not been a joint enterprise of equals. Ayub had used Mirza's willingness to impose martial law as cover for his own seizure of power, and once he no longer needed the civilian facade, he discarded it. Pakistan's first experiment with democracy had come to an end — not after a long period of stable governance that failed, but after barely a decade of increasing dysfunction that the military had done nothing to arrest and much to accelerate.

Initial Policies of the Military Government

Ayub Khan moved quickly to establish his government's agenda. He launched a drive against corruption, creating accountability tribunals that investigated politicians and senior officials. Many prominent figures were disqualified from public life under the Elective Bodies (Disqualification) Order (EBDO), which could be used to bar individuals from political activity. Some of these actions were genuine anti-corruption efforts; others were clearly political — targeting potential rivals while leaving Ayub's allies untouched.

Ayub brought in a team of technocrats to manage the economy, deliberately sidelining politicians. His economic team, which included figures like Ghulam Faruque and later would incorporate American-trained economists, pursued policies of industrial promotion and agricultural reform. Land reforms were introduced in 1959, though they were criticized for being too modest to fundamentally alter the feudal landholding patterns of West Pakistan.

1959 Consolidating Military Rule — Reforms and Repression

Basic Democracies System

One of Ayub Khan's most distinctive political innovations was the Basic Democracies system, introduced in October 1959. Recognizing that he could not sustain military rule indefinitely without some form of popular participation, Ayub devised a system of indirect democracy. Some 80,000 'Basic Democrats' — local councilors elected directly by voters in their union councils — would serve as an electoral college for all higher offices, including the President and the National Assembly.

The Basic Democracies system was designed to manage political participation rather than enable genuine democracy. Ayub calculated that 80,000 local notables could be more easily influenced by government pressure and patronage than the entire electorate. The system effectively disenfranchised urban political activists and educated elites who were most likely to organize effective political opposition. It formalized a form of rural patronage politics in which government-connected local bosses controlled political outcomes.

Ayub used the Basic Democrats to legitimate his own position in a referendum held in February 1960. The vote — which asked Basic Democrats whether they had confidence in the President — was conducted in an atmosphere of government pressure and produced an overwhelming 'yes' vote. This gave Ayub a veneer of democratic legitimacy while ensuring that actual democracy remained safely distant.

Land Reforms

In January 1959, the military government announced land reforms for West Pakistan — the first significant attempt in Pakistani history to address the grossly unequal distribution of agricultural land. The reforms placed ceilings on individual landholdings: no one could own more than 500 acres of irrigated land or 1,000 acres of unirrigated land. Surplus land above these ceilings was to be acquired by the government and redistributed to landless peasants.

In practice, the reforms were far less transformative than they appeared on paper. The ceilings were generous enough that wealthy landlords could transfer land to relatives and avoid them. Compensation was paid to landlords for acquired land. The pace of redistribution was slow. And East Pakistan, which had far more equitable land distribution due to Bengal's own reforms in the late 1940s, was exempted from the West Pakistan reforms.

Ayub's land reforms were criticized by the left as too timid and by the feudal right as an intrusion on property rights. They satisfied neither camp fully. But they did represent at least a symbolic

commitment to social reform that distinguished Ayub's early period from the purely extractive politics of the 1950s.

Decision to Move the Capital

Among the more dramatic decisions of the Ayub era was the announcement that Pakistan's capital would be moved from Karachi to a new city to be built near Rawalpindi in the north. The new capital, called Islamabad, was to be purpose-built according to a modern master plan. Several reasons were offered for the move: Karachi was too distant from the military and administrative heartland of West Pakistan; the new capital would symbolize Pakistan's modernity and ambition; and a capital in the north would be strategically less vulnerable.

Construction of Islamabad began in earnest in the early 1960s. The Greek architect Constantinos Doxiadis was engaged to plan the city, which would be laid out in a rational grid with broad boulevards, green spaces, and separated residential, commercial, and governmental sectors. The move would take years to complete, but the decision itself was a significant statement about the Ayub government's vision for Pakistan's future.

Economic Performance Under Military Rule

Ayub Khan's economic policies produced genuine results in terms of growth statistics. Industrial output increased significantly, supported by government protection and incentives for private industry. Foreign investment, particularly American, was attracted by political stability and favorable terms. Agricultural output grew, aided by the Green Revolution technologies — improved seeds, fertilizers, and irrigation — that were being introduced during this period.

Pakistan's GDP growth rate in the late 1950s and early 1960s was among the higher rates in Asia. International institutions, including the World Bank, praised Pakistan's economic management and held it up as a model for developing countries. The economic success was real, but it masked serious problems: the benefits were very unequally distributed, the East-West gap continued to widen, and growth was heavily dependent on foreign aid.

1960 Pakistan at the End of Its First Decade

The U-2 Incident and International Implications

Pakistan's entanglement in Cold War superpower rivalry was dramatically illustrated in 1960 by the U-2 incident. On 1 May 1960, an American U-2 spy plane was shot down over the Soviet Union while on a reconnaissance mission. The pilot, Gary Powers, was captured. It emerged that the plane had taken off from Peshawar, Pakistan, where the US had established a secret air base — a facility whose existence Pakistan's government had carefully avoided acknowledging publicly.

The Soviet Union's anger was directed at both the United States and Pakistan. Soviet Premier Khrushchev threatened that if Pakistan allowed its territory to be used against the Soviet Union, it would face 'rockets.' The incident embarrassed Pakistan internationally and demonstrated the risks of hosting American military facilities. It also revealed to the Pakistani public the full extent of their country's military entanglement with the United States — an entanglement that many Pakistanis had known little about.

The U-2 incident did not lead Pakistan to abandon its American alliance, but it added to the growing debate within Pakistan about the wisdom of the country's foreign policy alignment. Voices calling for a more balanced approach to foreign policy — seeking good relations with both the East and West, as well as with China and Muslim countries — were gaining in strength.

Ayub's Presidential Referendum

In February 1960, Ayub Khan consolidated his political position through the referendum of Basic Democrats, as mentioned earlier. The vote gave him a new five-year presidential term with a claimed 95.6% approval — a figure that said more about the government's control over the process than about genuine public sentiment. With his position secured, Ayub Khan turned to the task of giving his government a constitutional framework.

The work of drafting a new constitution was assigned to a Constitution Commission chaired by former Chief Justice Mohammad Shahabuddin. The Commission was tasked with studying constitutional systems from around the world and recommending a system appropriate for Pakistan's conditions. Ayub had already made clear that he favored a presidential system rather than the parliamentary system of the 1956 constitution — a system in which, not coincidentally, he would hold all executive power.

Foreign Policy: China and the Muslim World

One of the notable foreign policy developments of 1960 was Pakistan's growing rapprochement with China. The border agreement negotiations between Pakistan and China, which would result in a formal border treaty in 1963, were laying the groundwork for what would become a 'all-weather friendship' — a relationship that China cultivated partly to put pressure on India. The China relationship would become increasingly important to Pakistan as its dependence on American support proved unreliable.

Pakistan also worked to strengthen its relations with the Muslim world. Membership in the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (then the Islamic Conference) gave Pakistan a platform for Muslim solidarity diplomacy. Relations with Arab countries, particularly Saudi Arabia and Egypt, were cultivated — though Pakistan's Cold War alignment with the West sometimes created tensions with Arab states that preferred non-alignment.

Social Changes at the End of the Decade

By 1960, Pakistan was a significantly different society from the newborn state of 1947. The population had grown substantially, from approximately 75 million to over 90 million. Urbanization was proceeding rapidly: Karachi had grown from a medium-sized port city into one of the largest cities in Asia, with a population approaching 2 million. Lahore, Dhaka, Chittagong, and other cities were also growing quickly.

Education had expanded, though from a very low base. Pakistan had established a number of new universities and technical institutes. Literacy rates, while still low, were improving. A growing middle class of government employees, businessmen, teachers, and professionals was emerging, concentrated mainly in urban centers.

Women's status in Pakistan remained deeply circumscribed by traditional and religious norms, particularly in rural areas. The Ayub regime, while not feminist in any systematic sense, did introduce some legal reforms affecting women, including the Muslim Family Laws Ordinance of 1961, which regulated polygamy and divorce and was one of the more progressive pieces of social legislation in Pakistan's history up to that point.

East-West Pakistan: A Widening Gulf

As Pakistan entered the 1960s, the gulf between its two wings — geographic, economic, cultural, and political — had grown rather than narrowed since independence. West Pakistan controlled the federal government, the military establishment, the civil service, and the major centers of industrial and commercial activity. East Pakistan, home to the majority of Pakistan's population, remained economically underdeveloped and politically marginalized.

The Bengali language movement of 1952 had been a warning. The United Front's election victory in East Pakistan in 1954 had been a warning. The continued concentration of development expenditure in West Pakistan was a warning. But the ruling elite in West Pakistan — in the military, the civil service, and the business community — showed insufficient urgency about addressing East Pakistani grievances. The seeds of the ultimate tragedy of 1971 were being planted in these early years of the country's history.

Pakistan in 1960: A Statistical Snapshot

Population: approx. 93 million | East Pakistan: approx. 51 million | West Pakistan: approx. 42 million | GDP Growth Rate: approx. 5% | Literacy Rate: approx. 19% | Capital: Karachi (Islamabad under construction) | Form of Government: Military rule under President Ayub Khan | Number of Prime Ministers since 1947: 7 | Military coups: 1 (1958) | Constitutions: 2 (1956 constitution abrogated, new constitution being drafted)

Conclusion: Thirteen Formative Years

The thirteen years from 1947 to 1960 were the most consequential in Pakistan's history. The choices made in this period — about political structures, alliances, economic priorities, and the relationship between the two wings — shaped Pakistan's trajectory in ways that are still being felt today.

Pakistan had achieved independence through an extraordinary act of political will against considerable odds. Its founders had envisioned a state that would provide security, opportunity, and dignity to South Asia's Muslim population. The ideals expressed in Jinnah's founding speeches — tolerance, equality, justice — were genuine and inspiring. But the political reality that followed independence diverged sharply from those ideals.

The failure of civilian democracy in Pakistan's first decade was not inevitable. It resulted from a specific combination of factors: the premature deaths of Jinnah and Liaquat Ali Khan, who provided irreplaceable leadership; the failure to hold general elections and build a genuine democratic culture; the interference of an overbearing Governor-General in parliamentary processes; the ambitions of a military institution that had grown powerful and self-confident; and the structural tension between East and West Pakistan that no government found the political will to address honestly.

The military coup of 1958 did not solve Pakistan's problems; it merely suppressed them. Ayub Khan's rule brought economic growth and administrative stability but at the cost of democratic development and genuine federalism. The grievances of East Pakistan, the aspirations of civil society, and the political instincts of the Pakistani people could be managed for a time but not indefinitely.

Looking back from the perspective of the twenty-first century, the history of Pakistan's founding decade reads as a story of enormous potential and tragic missed opportunities. The potential was real: Pakistan's people were resilient, resourceful, and capable. The potential was also squandered — by self-interested politicians, by authoritarian governors, by military officers who confused their institutional interests with the national interest, and by the structural problems of a state divided against itself geographically.

The history of 1947–1960 is essential reading for anyone who wishes to understand modern Pakistan — its political culture, its civil-military tensions, its regional disparities, and its complex relationship with democracy. The questions raised in these thirteen years — about the nature of Islamic governance, about the rights of federating units, about civil-military relations, about the rights of minorities — remain unresolved and urgently alive.

> *"Pakistan is a difficult country to govern and an impossible one to destroy." — commonly attributed to Pakistani political wisdom*

Pakistan entered the 1960s with a military government, an unresolved constitutional question, a growing economic gap between its two wings, and Cold War entanglements that limited its diplomatic options. The decade that followed would bring further trials: a second war with India, a constitutional experiment that failed, and ultimately the catastrophe of 1971. But it would also bring economic modernization, cultural flowering, and moments of genuine national pride.

The story of Pakistan is far from over. And it began, in all its complexity and promise, in those desperate, exhilarating, and ultimately costly years from 1947 to 1960.

Appendix: Key Events Timeline 1947–1960

Date	Event
14 Aug 1947	Pakistan achieves independence; Jinnah becomes Governor-General
11 Aug 1947	Jinnah's historic address to Constituent Assembly — vision of inclusive state
Oct 1947	First Kashmir War begins; tribal fighters invade Kashmir
1 Jul 1948	State Bank of Pakistan inaugurated by Jinnah
11 Sep 1948	Death of Quaid-e-Azam Mohammad Ali Jinnah
1 Jan 1949	Kashmir ceasefire comes into effect
12 Mar 1949	Objectives Resolution passed by Constituent Assembly
8 Apr 1950	Liaquat-Nehru Pact signed in Delhi
Mar 1951	Rawalpindi Conspiracy uncovered; army officers arrested
16 Oct 1951	Prime Minister Liaquat Ali Khan assassinated in Rawalpindi
21 Feb 1952	Dhaka language movement; students killed by police — Ekushey February
Apr 1953	Governor-General dismisses PM Nazimuddin; Bogra appointed
Feb-Mar 1953	Anti-Ahmadiyya riots in Punjab; martial law in Lahore
Oct 1953	Bogra Formula announced for parliamentary representation
Mar 1954	East Pakistan elections: United Front routs Muslim League
May 1954	Governor's Rule imposed in East Pakistan
19 May 1954	US-Pakistan Mutual Defense Assistance Agreement signed
Sep 1954	Pakistan joins SEATO
Oct 1954	Governor-General dissolves Constituent Assembly
1955	Baghdad Pact signed; Pakistan joins CENTO
14 Oct 1955	One Unit scheme implemented — West Pakistan created
Aug 1955	Iskander Mirza becomes Governor-General
23 Mar 1956	Constitution of Pakistan promulgated; Pakistan becomes Islamic Republic
23 Mar 1956	Iskander Mirza becomes Pakistan's first President
Sep 1956	Suhrawardy becomes Prime Minister
Nov 1956	Pakistan condemns Suez invasion
Oct 1957	Suhrawardy dismissed; Chundrigar appointed PM
Dec 1957	Feroz Khan Noon appointed Prime Minister
7 Oct 1958	Mirza abrogates constitution; martial law declared; Ayub becomes CMLA

Date	Event
27 Oct 1958	Mirza removed; Ayub Khan becomes President
Jan 1959	Land reforms announced for West Pakistan
Oct 1959	Basic Democracies system announced
1 May 1960	U-2 spy plane (from Peshawar) shot down over USSR
Feb 1960	Ayub confirms in power through Basic Democrats referendum
1960	Decision to build new capital Islamabad finalized

Appendix: Heads of State & Government 1947–1960

Name	Role	Period
M.A. Jinnah	Governor-General	Aug 1947 – Sep 1948
Khawaja Nazimuddin	Governor-General	Sep 1948 – Oct 1951
Ghulam Mohammad	Governor-General	Oct 1951 – Aug 1955
Iskander Mirza	Gov-Gen / President	Aug 1955 – Oct 1958
Ayub Khan	President (CMLA)	Oct 1958 – 1969
Liaquat Ali Khan	Prime Minister	Aug 1947 – Oct 1951
Khawaja Nazimuddin	Prime Minister	Oct 1951 – Apr 1953
Mohammad Ali Bogra	Prime Minister	Apr 1953 – Aug 1955
Ch. Mohammad Ali	Prime Minister	Aug 1955 – Sep 1956
H.S. Suhrawardy	Prime Minister	Sep 1956 – Oct 1957
I.I. Chundrigar	Prime Minister	Oct 1957 – Dec 1957
Feroz Khan Noon	Prime Minister	Dec 1957 – Oct 1958

Pakistan Zindabad

Long Live Pakistan

HISTORY OF PAKISTAN

A Comprehensive Year-by-Year Account

1961 – 1972

From Ayub's Decade of Development to the Tragedy of 1971

Covering: Politics • Governance • Economy • Military • Society • Foreign Relations

This volume is a direct continuation of the 1947–1960 history. Page numbering, style, and structure are preserved from the original document.

Foreword: The Second Decade and Its Reckoning

When Pakistan entered the 1960s under General Ayub Khan's military government, it appeared on the surface to be a state finding its footing. Growth statistics were impressive, administrative order had replaced political chaos, and international observers praised Pakistan as a model of development. Yet beneath the veneer of stability ran deep structural fault lines that no amount of economic growth could paper over.

The decade of 1961–1971 would prove the most consequential and tragic in Pakistan's history. It began with optimism — a new constitution in 1962, a war with India in 1965 that produced a surge of national pride, and economic modernization that created a prosperous middle class in West Pakistan. But the inequities it concealed — between East and West, between the military and civil society, between those who governed and those who were governed — could not be suppressed forever.

The general election of December 1970, Pakistan's first on the basis of direct adult franchise, delivered a verdict that the ruling establishment refused to accept. The catastrophic decisions of early 1971 — the military crackdown, the genocide that followed, and the war with India in December — dismembered Pakistan and gave birth to Bangladesh. It was the greatest failure in South Asian statecraft since Partition itself.

This volume covers those twelve years in detail: the triumphs and the tragedy, the personalities who shaped events, and the structural forces that made catastrophe almost inevitable. It is an essential chapter in understanding not only Pakistani history but the nature of nation-building, democracy, and the consequences of political exclusion in divided societies.

1961 Consolidation and Social Reform

Ayub's Authoritarian Modernism Takes Shape

Muslim Family Laws Ordinance

One of the most significant pieces of social legislation in Pakistan's history was promulgated on 2 March 1961: the Muslim Family Laws Ordinance (MFLO). It required that a man wishing to take a second wife must first obtain permission from an Arbitration Council; registration of marriages and divorces became compulsory; and the minimum age of marriage was set at sixteen for girls and eighteen for boys.

The MFLO was genuinely progressive by the standards of Muslim family law in the region, aiming to reduce the arbitrary repudiation of wives, curb unchecked polygamy, and protect women's legal rights. The religious establishment, led by Jamaat-e-Islami and various ulama bodies, condemned it as un-Islamic. But the military government imposed the reforms by executive fiat, bypassing any legislature. The MFLO remained in force and became one of the most lasting legacies of the Ayub era — proof that authoritarian governments can sometimes implement social reforms that elected governments constrained by conservative lobbies may not dare to touch.

Islamabad: Building the New Capital

Construction of Islamabad was proceeding under the Greek urban planner Constantinos Doxiadis, who had designed the city on a numbered grid system with residential zones, diplomatic enclaves, a government secretariat area, and a university town. The design was deliberately rational and modernist — a physical embodiment of Ayub's vision of a forward-looking, planned Pakistan.

The move from Karachi to Islamabad was partly strategic — locating the capital closer to the military's Northern Command and the Kashmir front — and partly symbolic. Rawalpindi served as the interim capital during construction. Ministries and the diplomatic corps gradually moved through the decade, and by the late 1960s Islamabad had emerged as a functioning, if still incomplete, capital city.

Rapprochement with China

Pakistan's foreign policy underwent significant reorientation as Ayub pursued closer relations with China. Pakistan's alliance with the United States had not delivered on Kashmir; India was deepening its relationship with the Soviet Union; and China — engaged in its own rivalry with India — was a natural strategic partner.

Boundary demarcation talks advanced significantly in 1961, leading toward the formal Sino-Pakistani border agreement that would be signed in March 1963. Pakistan agreed to cede a portion of Karakoram territory in the Shaksgam Valley; in return, China recognized Pakistani administration of the northern areas. The agreement was the cornerstone of the Pakistan-China 'all-weather friendship.'

1962 A New Constitution — Presidential and Controlled

Ayub Formalizes His Rule and Lifts Martial Law

The Constitution of 1962

On 1 March 1962, Ayub Khan promulgated Pakistan's second constitution, lifting martial law and ostensibly restoring civilian governance. The new constitution was tailored precisely to consolidate Ayub's personal power under a constitutional fig leaf. It established a presidential system in which the President held enormous executive authority — he could issue ordinances, veto legislation, and dismiss the National Assembly — while the legislature was reduced to a largely advisory role.

The constitution retained the Basic Democracies system as the electoral framework. The 80,000 Basic Democrats served as the electoral college for the President and National Assembly, insulating the political process from mass public opinion. Political parties were initially omitted from the constitution — a 'partyless democracy' — though they were re-legalized in 1963.

East Pakistan's politicians were deeply dissatisfied. A presidential system concentrated power in Ayub's hands and in West Pakistani bureaucracy. East Pakistan's numerical majority was irrelevant under a system where votes were cast by 80,000 Basic Democrats rather than 50 million adults. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and the Awami League condemned the constitution as a tool of West Pakistani domination.

The Sino-Indian War and Its Implications for Pakistan

In October–November 1962, China and India fought a brief but decisive border war in which the Chinese military inflicted a humiliating defeat on India, capturing territory in both Ladakh and the North-East Frontier Agency. The war shattered the myth of Indian military invincibility.

For Pakistan, the Sino-Indian war was a strategic gift. India — suddenly desperate for military assistance — turned to the United States and Britain, who began arming India on a large scale. Pakistan watched with alarm as its rival received massive military aid while the US-Pakistan alliance appeared to prioritize Indian stability. At the same time, China's friendship with Pakistan was cemented by a shared adversary. The war also created pressure on Pakistan from Washington to exercise restraint and not exploit India's vulnerability — a demand that deepened Pakistani resentment of American policy.

1963 Foreign Policy Pivots and Rising Discontent

The China Alliance Deepens; Economic Inequality Grows

The Sino-Pakistani Border Agreement

On 2 March 1963, Pakistan and China signed the agreement settling the border in the Karakoram. Both countries agreed to reopen negotiations once the Kashmir dispute was finally settled — a provision acknowledging the agreement's provisional nature. Chinese military and economic assistance began flowing to Pakistan, and Chinese-built infrastructure projects became central features of Pakistan's strategic posture.

Economic Growth and Its Discontents: The '22 Families'

By 1963, Pakistan's macroeconomic performance was genuinely impressive — GDP growth was running at around 6% annually and the Second Five Year Plan was on track. The Green Revolution was beginning to transform agricultural productivity in West Pakistan's Punjab through high-yield variety seeds, chemical fertilizers, and improved irrigation.

Yet the growth was deeply unequal. The benefits of industrialization were concentrated among a small number of business families — the '22 families' who, according to a later analysis by economist Mahbub ul Haq, controlled a disproportionate share of Pakistan's industrial and financial assets. These families, mostly West Pakistani, benefited from government protection, subsidized credit, and export incentives.

East Pakistan's grievances deepened. The province continued to earn the majority of Pakistan's foreign exchange through jute exports but received less than one-third of development expenditure. The widening gap was systematically documented by East Pakistani economists and would become the central plank of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's political programme.

1964–1965 The Presidential Election and the Second Kashmir War

Fatima Jinnah Challenges Ayub; Operation Gibraltar Unleashes Conflict

The Presidential Election of 1965: Ayub vs. Fatima Jinnah

The presidential election of January 1965 was the most significant political contest of the Ayub era. The Combined Opposition Parties (COP) united behind Fatima Jinnah — the 71-year-old sister of the Quaid-e-Azam — as their candidate. Her candidacy carried enormous symbolic power: the Quaid's sister, standing against the general who had subverted the constitutional order her brother had built.

The election campaign was passionate and bitterly fought. Fatima Jinnah drew enormous crowds wherever she spoke. In East Pakistan especially, her support was overwhelming — Sheikh Mujib's Awami League threw its full weight behind her. Ayub Khan's government used every instrument at its disposal: government patronage, pressure on Basic Democrats, and control of state media.

Ayub won with approximately 63% of the Basic Democrats' votes. In East Pakistan, Fatima Jinnah won a majority of Basic Democrats — a stunning result that demonstrated the province's wholesale rejection of Ayub's rule. The election result deepened Ayub's distrust of East Pakistan and hardened the East-West divide.

Operation Gibraltar and the 1965 War with India

In August 1965, Pakistan launched Operation Gibraltar — the infiltration of thousands of trained guerrilla fighters into Indian-held Kashmir, intended to spark a popular uprising. The fighters were expected to be welcomed by Kashmiris; instead, they were widely reported to Indian security forces, and the operation failed comprehensively.

India responded with a major military offensive across the Ceasefire Line and then, on 6 September 1965, crossed the international border in Punjab, advancing toward Lahore. The news that Indian tanks were advancing on Lahore electrified Pakistan and produced a remarkable surge of national unity. The Pakistani Army, Air Force, and Navy all performed with considerable distinction.

The war lasted seventeen days before a UN-brokered ceasefire on 23 September 1965. Neither side achieved its objectives. Pakistan had failed to dislodge India from Kashmir; India had failed to capture Lahore or Sialkot. Both sides claimed victory. The genuine courage of Pakistani forces was real, but the strategic reality was that Operation Gibraltar had been a catastrophic miscalculation.

The Tashkent Declaration

Soviet Premier Kosygin hosted peace talks between Ayub Khan and Indian Prime Minister Lal Bahadur Shastri at Tashkent in January 1966. The resulting Tashkent Declaration committed both sides to withdraw to pre-war positions and normalize relations, saying nothing substantive about Kashmir.

The declaration was received with outrage by significant segments of Pakistani opinion. Having been told throughout the war that Pakistan was winning, the public now saw their government accepting terms that offered nothing on Kashmir. Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, positioning himself as a political opponent of Ayub, was particularly vocal in his condemnation. The political fallout from Tashkent contributed significantly to the erosion of Ayub's authority. Lal Bahadur Shastri died of a

heart attack in Tashkent hours after signing the declaration.

1966 The Six Points and the Road to Bengali Nationalism

Mujib's Manifesto Sets Pakistan on a Collision Course

Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and the Six-Point Programme

The most consequential political development of 1966 — and arguably of Pakistan's entire history — was the announcement by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman of the Six-Point Programme on 5 February at an opposition conference in Lahore. The Six Points were a comprehensive demand for East Pakistani autonomy that would have fundamentally restructured Pakistan's federal arrangement.

The Six Points demanded: a parliamentary federal constitution with free elections; federal government authority limited to defense and foreign affairs only; separate foreign exchange accounts for East Pakistan; East Pakistan's own taxation powers with the federation funded by mandatory contributions; the right to maintain trade relations and establish trade missions abroad; and the right to raise its own paramilitary force.

The Six Points were denounced by Ayub and the West Pakistani establishment as a separatist manifesto. Mujib insisted they were a demand for genuine federalism within a united Pakistan. Whether they could have been implemented without effectively creating two separate states remains a subject of historical debate. What is not debatable is the political earthquake they caused: the Six Points crystallized East Pakistani aspirations and gave Mujib's Awami League an unassailable popular platform.

Bhutto's Departure and the Pakistan People's Party

Zulfikar Ali Bhutto resigned as Foreign Minister in June 1966, citing disagreement with Ayub's handling of the Tashkent Declaration. This was the beginning of his transformation from regime insider to populist challenger. Bhutto was a gifted orator who understood, as few contemporaries did, the transformative potential of mass politics in Pakistan.

In November 1967, Bhutto founded the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) with the slogan 'Islam is our faith, democracy is our polity, socialism is our economy.' The PPP's message of land reform, nationalization of industry, and workers' rights resonated powerfully with West Pakistan's urban poor and younger educated classes left behind by Ayub's elite-focused development. Within two years, the PPP would become the dominant political force in West Pakistan.

The Agartala Conspiracy Case

In January 1968, the government charged Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and thirty-four others with conspiring with Indian officials to bring about the secession of East Pakistan through an armed uprising. The alleged conspiracy was said to have been hatched at Agartala in the Indian state of Tripura.

The case backfired catastrophically. Rather than discrediting Mujib, it transformed him into a martyr and symbol of East Pakistani resistance. Mass protests erupted across East Pakistan demanding his release. The government was ultimately forced to drop the charges and release Mujib in February 1969.

1968–1969 The People's Uprising and the Fall of Ayub Khan

Mass Protests Topple the 'Decade of Development'

The Mass Uprising of 1968–1969

Beginning in late 1968 and intensifying through early 1969, Pakistan experienced a mass popular uprising that brought the country to the brink of collapse. The protests began in West Pakistan among students and workers outraged by economic inequality and political repression, then spread with even greater intensity to East Pakistan.

In West Pakistan, Bhutto's PPP provided organizational leadership, channeling popular anger into political demands. Students at universities in Karachi, Lahore, and Rawalpindi clashed repeatedly with police. Industrial workers struck. The '22 families' thesis became a rallying cry for the left.

In East Pakistan, the movement was even more explosive. The Agartala case had converted Mujib into a folk hero. Students, lawyers, and workers took to the streets demanding his release, East Pakistani autonomy, and an end to military rule. Government attempts to suppress the movement through police and paramilitary force only intensified popular fury.

The Round Table Conference and Its Failure

In February 1969, Ayub Khan released Mujibur Rahman from prison and called a Round Table Conference of all major political leaders to discuss constitutional arrangements. Mujib insisted on the Six Points as a non-negotiable minimum; Bhutto refused sessions where his demands were not adequately addressed; and Ayub could not offer concessions that his military backers would accept. The conference collapsed without agreement.

Yahya Khan Takes Power: 25 March 1969

With civil order collapsing and the political process deadlocked, Ayub Khan transferred power not to any civilian leader but to General Agha Mohammad Yahya Khan, Commander-in-Chief of the Pakistan Army. Yahya declared martial law, abrogated the 1962 constitution, and dissolved the national and provincial assemblies.

Yahya was blunter and less intellectually inclined than Ayub. His most consequential decision was to hold free and fair general elections on the basis of direct adult franchise. He appears to have expected a fragmented result that the military could manage; instead, the elections delivered an unambiguous verdict that his government was constitutionally obliged to honor but proved psychologically incapable of accepting.

Pakistan in 1969

Population: ~115 million | Form of Government: Martial Law — General Yahya Khan | Constitutions abrogated: 2 | Military coups: 2 (1958, 1969) | Major parties: PPP (West), Awami League (East)

1970 The General Election — A Nation Chooses, A Government Refuses

Pakistan's First Direct Election Tears the Country Apart

The Legal Framework Order and Election Preparations

Yahya Khan promulgated the Legal Framework Order (LFO) in March 1970, providing for direct elections to the National Assembly on the basis of adult franchise — one person, one vote — for the first time in Pakistan's history. Seats were allocated proportionally to population, giving East Pakistan 162 of 313 National Assembly seats — a clear majority reflecting its demographic weight.

The LFO contained an 'authentication' clause that reserved to the President the right to authenticate the constitutional framework that the elected assembly would draft, effectively giving Yahya a veto over the new constitution — a ticking time bomb that would detonate after the election results came in.

The Bhola Cyclone: November 1970

Before the elections, Pakistan was struck by one of the deadliest natural disasters in recorded history. On the night of 12–13 November 1970, the Bhola Cyclone made landfall on the coast of East Pakistan, driving a massive storm surge across the low-lying delta islands. The death toll was catastrophic: estimates range from 300,000 to 500,000 dead — making it the deadliest tropical cyclone in history.

The Yahya government's response was grotesquely inadequate. Relief supplies were slow to arrive and military assets not promptly deployed. In East Pakistan, the cyclone and the government's response to it became a symbol of federal indifference to East Pakistani lives. Sheikh Mujib's Awami League organized relief efforts and gained enormous popular credit. The catastrophe almost certainly contributed to the scale of the Awami League's election victory.

The Election Results: December 1970

The general election was held on 7 December 1970 and produced results that shocked Pakistan's establishment to its core. In East Pakistan, the Awami League won 160 of the province's 162 National Assembly seats with approximately 73% of the vote. With 160 seats, the Awami League had an absolute majority in the 313-seat National Assembly — without winning a single seat in West Pakistan.

In West Pakistan, Bhutto's PPP swept Punjab and Sindh, winning 81 seats. The arithmetic was brutally clear: the Awami League had won the election and had the constitutional right to form the government. Its leader, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, would be Prime Minister of Pakistan. Bhutto, who had expected a fragmented result requiring a coalition, found himself instead facing the prospect of opposition leader in a Pakistan governed from Dhaka.

Bhutto's Refusal and the Military's Calculations

Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's response to the election results was fateful. He refused to attend the National Assembly session scheduled for 3 March 1971 in Dhaka unless his demands for a power-sharing arrangement were met. His slogan — 'udhar tum, idhar hum' (you there, us here) — suggested a de facto partition of the country between the two leaders.

The military establishment was alarmed for its own reasons. A government in Islamabad led by the Awami League, committed to implementing the Six Points, would fundamentally alter the constitutional arrangement that gave the Army its dominant position. General Yahya, his senior commanders, and Bhutto thus found themselves with a convergent interest in preventing the normal constitutional transfer of power.

1971 The Year Pakistan Broke — Genocide, War, and the Birth of Bangladesh

The Greatest Tragedy in South Asian History Since Partition

The Postponement of the Assembly: 1 March 1971

On 1 March 1971, Yahya Khan postponed the National Assembly session indefinitely, citing Bhutto's refusal to attend. The announcement triggered an immediate and total shutdown in East Pakistan. What followed was essentially a non-cooperation movement of extraordinary completeness: government offices closed, courts stopped, businesses shut. Sheikh Mujib issued directives obeyed by virtually the entire East Pakistani population.

Talks between Mujib, Yahya, and Bhutto continued through March in Dhaka, but without genuine intent on the military's side. While the talks proceeded, Pakistani military reinforcements were being flown into East Pakistan — a clear signal of what was being planned.

> *"The struggle this time is for emancipation. The struggle this time is for independence. Joy Bangla!"*
>
> *— Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, 7 March 1971 — Racecourse Ground, Dhaka (est. 1 million present)*

Operation Searchlight: 25 March 1971

The talks in Dhaka ended without agreement on the night of 25 March 1971. That same night, the Pakistan Army launched Operation Searchlight — a coordinated military crackdown intended to destroy the Awami League's political organization and suppress the Bengali nationalist movement by force. It was one of the most calculated acts of political violence in modern history.

The Army's targets included the Dhaka University campus, where students and faculty were killed in large numbers; Hindu neighborhoods in Old Dhaka, which were systematically attacked and burned; and the houses of known political activists. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was arrested at his home in the early hours of 26 March and flown to West Pakistan, where he was imprisoned.

The scale of violence that followed Operation Searchlight over nine months has been extensively investigated. The Bangladeshi government and many historians use the term genocide to describe the killings. Estimates of the total death toll range from a conservative 300,000 to Bangladeshi official figures of 3 million. Millions fled into India as refugees. Rape was used systematically as a weapon of war on a massive scale.

The Liberation War and Indian Intervention

Bengali resistance was immediate and determined. On 26 March 1971, Major Ziaur Rahman broadcast a declaration of independence from a radio station in Chittagong in the name of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. The Mukti Bahini (Liberation Forces), comprising elements of the East Pakistan Rifles, Bengali police, and civilians, organized armed resistance across the province.

India's role was decisive and openly declared. Prime Minister Indira Gandhi provided the Mukti Bahini with training, weapons, sanctuary, and intelligence. The refugee crisis — by end of 1971 approximately ten million East Pakistani refugees had entered India — gave India both motivation

and justification for direct military intervention.

On 3 December 1971, Pakistan launched pre-emptive air strikes on Indian air bases in the west, hoping to replicate Israel's 1967 strategy. The strikes were largely ineffective and provided India with formal justification for full-scale war on both fronts. The Indian military's advance into East Pakistan proceeded with overwhelming speed.

The Fall of Dhaka: 16 December 1971

The military contest in East Pakistan was brief and decisive. The Pakistan Army, facing a combined Indian and Mukti Bahini force, was outmaneuvered and outfought. Cut off from resupply and reinforcement, with no prospect of relief from West Pakistan, the Pakistani forces had no viable military option.

On 16 December 1971, Lieutenant General A.A.K. Niazi signed the instrument of surrender in Dhaka before Indian General Jagjit Singh Aurora. Approximately 93,000 Pakistani soldiers and civilians became prisoners of war — the largest military surrender since World War Two. East Pakistan ceased to exist. The People's Republic of Bangladesh was born.

The loss of East Pakistan was the most catastrophic event in Pakistan's history — a failure of statecraft, military judgment, and basic human decency. Pakistan lost more than half its population and its claim to be a functioning democracy. The psychological wound inflicted on Pakistani society — and particularly on the military institution — was profound and lasting.

The 1971 War: Key Statistics

Pakistani POWs surrendered: ~93,000 | Refugee flow into India: ~10 million | Estimated East Pakistani deaths: 300,000–3,000,000 (disputed) | Duration of Indo-Pakistani War: 13 days (3–16 December 1971) | Date of Bangladesh independence: 16 December 1971

Yahya's Fall; Bhutto Takes Power

The military disaster destroyed Yahya Khan's legitimacy. Facing a furious public, a humiliated military, and the reality of Pakistan's dismemberment, Yahya resigned on 20 December 1971 and transferred power to Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, who became Pakistan's first civilian Chief Martial Law Administrator and then President.

Bhutto inherited a shattered country: 93,000 prisoners of war in Indian hands, a demoralized military, a collapsed economy, and a population in shock. His task was to rebuild — and he approached it with the enormous energy and political gifts that were his defining qualities.

1972 Rebuilding from the Ruins

Bhutto's Pakistan Confronts Loss, Reform, and New Beginnings

The Simla Agreement: 2 July 1972

Pakistan's most urgent foreign policy task was to negotiate the release of the 93,000 Pakistani prisoners of war and to stabilize the relationship with India. Bhutto met Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi at Simla in late June and early July 1972, resulting in the Simla Agreement signed on 2 July.

The agreement committed both countries to resolve their differences through bilateral negotiations and to respect the Line of Control (LoC) in Kashmir — the successor to the Ceasefire Line, now renamed following the 1971 war. India agreed to return Pakistani prisoners of war in stages.

The Simla Agreement was presented by Bhutto as a diplomatic success — Pakistan had avoided the punitive peace terms that India's position of overwhelming military advantage might have produced. Critics argued that Bhutto had conceded too much on Kashmir by accepting bilateralism, effectively sidelining UN resolutions calling for a plebiscite. This debate continued for decades.

Economic Nationalization and Social Reforms

Bhutto moved quickly to implement the PPP's socialist economic agenda. In January 1972, he nationalized thirty-one major industrial units including steel, heavy engineering, and chemical industries. Banks were nationalized in 1974, and life insurance companies in 1972. Educational institutions were nationalized in the early 1970s.

The nationalization drive was partly ideological and partly a response to the deeply unpopular concentration of wealth among the '22 families.' In the short term it was enormously popular with workers and the urban poor; in the longer term the nationalizations reduced investment, damaged economic efficiency, and created patronage-ridden public enterprises that drained the treasury.

Land reforms were announced in March 1972, reducing ceilings on landholdings more significantly than Ayub's 1959 reforms — to 150 acres of irrigated and 300 acres of unirrigated land. While welcomed by the rural poor, implementation was again plagued by large landowners' ability to circumvent ceilings through transfers to relatives.

The Interim Constitution and Restoration of Provinces

Bhutto promulgated an Interim Constitution on 21 April 1972 that established a parliamentary form of government and restored the federal structure dismantled by the One Unit scheme. The provinces of Punjab, Sindh, NWFP, and Balochistan were restored as separate units — a popular and necessary reversal of one of Ayub's most resented legacies.

The government also introduced significant labour reforms: workers were granted rights to form trade unions and engage in collective bargaining. A Workers' Participation Fund was established and minimum wages were raised — galvanizing the PPP's support base among the industrial working class.

Balochistan and Early Regional Tensions

Despite the restoration of provinces, Bhutto's relationship with NWFP and Balochistan was troubled from the outset. The provincial elections of March 1972 resulted in the NAP-JUI coalition winning

majorities in both provinces — not the PPP. Bhutto initially allowed these governments to function, but the relationship was strained by mutual suspicion.

In Balochistan especially, Bhutto saw the NAP government as a challenge to federal authority. In February 1973 he dismissed the NAP government in Balochistan, triggering an armed insurgency that would last until 1977 and claim thousands of lives. The handling of Balochistan was a serious failure of Bhutto's otherwise substantial political skills.

The 1973 Constitution: Pakistan's Democratic Achievement

The major constitutional achievement of Bhutto's government was the framing and adoption of Pakistan's third constitution, unanimously passed by the National Assembly on 10 April 1973 and promulgated on 14 August 1973. It established a parliamentary federal system with a bicameral parliament (National Assembly and Senate), a President as head of state, and a Prime Minister as head of government. It guaranteed fundamental rights and established the superior courts' independence.

Remarkably for Pakistan's constitutional history, the 1973 constitution was negotiated and agreed upon by virtually all major political parties — a genuine national compact. It remains in force today (with numerous amendments) and is the basis of Pakistan's current constitutional structure. Its adoption was perhaps the most lasting positive legacy of the Bhutto era.

"This constitution is the property not of one party but of the whole nation. It represents the consensus of the people of Pakistan."

— Zulfikar Ali Bhutto at the adoption of the 1973 Constitution

Pakistan in 1972–1973: A Statistical Snapshot

Population (West Pakistan only, post-1971): ~65 million | Head of State: President Zulfikar Ali Bhutto | POWs in India: 93,000 (release ongoing) | Major economic action: Nationalization of 31 industrial units | Simla Agreement: 2 July 1972 | 1973 Constitution promulgated: 14 August 1973

Conclusion: 1961–1972 — The Decade That Broke and Remade Pakistan

The twelve years covered in this volume form the most turbulent and consequential period in Pakistan's post-independence history. They began with the confident modernism of Ayub Khan's Basic Democracies and ended with the shock of national dismemberment and the tentative reconstruction under Bhutto's Pakistan Peoples Party.

The central tragedy of this period was the failure — beginning in 1947 and culminating in 1971 — to build a Pakistan that was genuinely federal, genuinely democratic, and genuinely capable of accommodating the aspirations of its Bengali majority. The Six Points of 1966 were not a separatist manifesto; they were a demand for the kind of federalism that Pakistan's founding documents had promised but never delivered. The failure to negotiate a constitutional arrangement that could have kept Pakistan united was not inevitable — it resulted from choices: Bhutto's choice to boycott the Assembly, Yahya's choice to launch Operation Searchlight, and the Army's choice to use genocidal violence rather than political accommodation.

The birth of Bangladesh was a catastrophe for the Pakistani state but it should not obscure the genuine achievements of this period. The 1965 war produced military courage and a generation of Pakistani heroes. The economic growth of the 1960s, however unequally distributed, raised living standards for millions. The 1973 constitution was a genuine democratic achievement — Pakistan's best constitutional document, framed with unprecedented political consensus.

Pakistan entered 1973 as a smaller, wounded, but constitutionally reborn state. The questions raised in these twelve years — about federalism, civil-military relations, economic equity, and the rights of minorities — remained unresolved. The story of modern Pakistan is in many ways the story of a state still working through the consequences of the choices made in these years.

Appendix: Key Events Timeline 1961–1972

Date	Event
2 Mar 1961	Muslim Family Laws Ordinance promulgated
1961	Islamabad construction proceeds under Doxiadis master plan
1 Mar 1962	1962 Constitution promulgated; martial law lifted
Oct–Nov 1962	Sino-Indian War — China defeats India; Pakistan watches warily
2 Mar 1963	Sino-Pakistani Border Agreement signed in the Karakoram
27 May 1964	Death of Indian PM Jawaharlal Nehru
Jan 1965	Presidential election: Ayub defeats Fatima Jinnah
Aug 1965	Operation Gibraltar — infiltrators enter Kashmir; plan fails
6 Sep 1965	India crosses international border; advances toward Lahore
23 Sep 1965	UN ceasefire ends 1965 Indo-Pakistani War
10 Jan 1966	Tashkent Declaration signed; Shastri dies the same night
5 Feb 1966	Sheikh Mujib announces Six-Point Programme in Lahore
Jun 1966	Bhutto resigns as Foreign Minister
Nov 1967	Pakistan People's Party (PPP) founded by Z.A. Bhutto
Jan 1968	Agartala Conspiracy Case filed against Mujib and 34 others
Late 1968–early 1969	Mass anti-Ayub uprising erupts across both wings
Feb 1969	Mujib released; Round Table Conference collapses
25 Mar 1969	Ayub transfers power to General Yahya Khan; martial law declared
Mar 1970	Legal Framework Order sets rules for direct elections
12–13 Nov 1970	Bhola Cyclone kills 300,000–500,000 in East Pakistan
7 Dec 1970	General elections: Awami League wins 160/162 East Pakistan seats
1 Mar 1971	Yahya postpones National Assembly session; East Pakistan erupts
7 Mar 1971	Mujib's historic speech at Racecourse Ground, Dhaka
25–26 Mar 1971	Operation Searchlight launched; Mujib arrested; Bangladesh declared
Mar–Dec 1971	Liberation War; Mukti Bahini insurgency; millions flee to India
3 Dec 1971	Pakistan launches air strikes; India declares full-scale war
16 Dec 1971	Pakistani forces surrender in Dhaka; Bangladesh born
20 Dec 1971	Yahya resigns; Bhutto becomes CMLA and President
8 Jan 1972	Sheikh Mujibur Rahman released from Pakistani imprisonment

Date	Event
Jan 1972	31 major industrial units nationalized by Bhutto government
21 Apr 1972	Interim Constitution promulgated; four provinces restored
2 Jul 1972	Simla Agreement signed — Bhutto and Indira Gandhi
Feb 1973	NAP government in Balochistan dismissed; insurgency begins
10 Apr 1973	1973 Constitution unanimously adopted by National Assembly
14 Aug 1973	1973 Constitution comes into force — Pakistan's Independence Day

Appendix: Heads of State & Government 1961–1972

Name	Role	Period
Ayub Khan	President (1962 Constitution)	Jun 1962 – Mar 1969
Agha Mohammad Yahya Khan	President / Chief Martial Law Administrator	Mar 1969 – Dec 1971
Zulfikar Ali Bhutto	CMLA / President / Prime Minister	Dec 1971 – Jul 1977
Nurul Amin	Prime Minister (briefly)	7–20 Dec 1971

■ Pakistan Zindabad ■

Long Live Pakistan

HISTORY OF PAKISTAN

A Comprehensive Year-by-Year Account

1973 – 1985

From the 1973 Constitution to Zia's Islamisation and the Afghan Jihad

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Foreword: Constitution, Coup, and Transformation

The years 1973 to 1985 encompass some of the most dramatic reversals of fortune in Pakistan's history. They begin with a moment of rare democratic achievement: the unanimous adoption of the 1973 Constitution, a genuine national compact that gave Pakistan its most durable constitutional framework. They end with that same constitution suspended, manipulated, and distorted beyond recognition by a military dictator who had executed the man who authored it.

Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's government (1971–1977) was a period of bold social reform and brutal political repression existing simultaneously. Bhutto gave Pakistan its nuclear programme, its 1973 Constitution, and a sense of wounded national pride rebuilt after 1971. He also ran rigged elections, jailed opponents, unleashed paramilitary forces, and cultivated a personality cult that corroded democratic institutions.

General Muhammad Zia ul-Haq, who overthrew Bhutto in July 1977, ranks among the most consequential — and most destructive — leaders in Pakistan's history. His eleven-year rule transformed the country's social fabric through a programme of Islamisation that reshaped law, education, gender relations, and political culture. His decision to join the American-sponsored jihad against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan flooded Pakistan with weapons, refugees, and a militant religious culture whose consequences are still being lived.

This volume covers thirteen years in detail, tracing the arc from democratic promise to authoritarian consolidation, from Bhutto's trial and execution to Zia's Islamic state, from the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan to Pakistan's transformation into a frontline state in the Cold War's final chapter. Every major political, economic, military, social, and foreign policy development is treated with the depth it deserves.

1973 The Constitution, Balochistan, and the Nuclear Decision

Pakistan's Democratic Apex and Its First Shadows

The 1973 Constitution: Pakistan's Democratic Compact

The year 1973 opened with the defining achievement of the Bhutto era and arguably the finest moment in Pakistan's constitutional history: the unanimous adoption of the 1973 Constitution on 10 April by the National Assembly, promulgated on 14 August — Pakistan's twenty-sixth independence anniversary. The constitution established a parliamentary federal system with a bicameral parliament (National Assembly and Senate), fundamental rights enforceable by the courts, and an independent judiciary. It declared Islam the state religion while guaranteeing religious freedom for minorities.

Crucially, the 1973 constitution was the product of genuine political consensus. All major parties — PPP, Muslim League factions, the Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam, regional parties from NWFP and Balochistan — signed on to it. This was unprecedented in Pakistan's constitutional history: both the 1956 and 1962 constitutions had been imposed rather than negotiated. The 1973 constitution reflected hard bargaining, real compromise, and genuine national ownership.

The constitution's federal structure distributed power between the centre and the provinces more equitably than any previous arrangement. A Concurrent Legislative List defined areas of shared federal-provincial jurisdiction. The Senate gave equal representation to all four provinces regardless of population — an important concession to the smaller provinces that had so long felt dominated by Punjab. The document remains Pakistan's operative constitution today, though it has been amended numerous times and suspended twice since its promulgation.

The constitution designated Islam as the state religion and required that the President and Prime Minister be Muslims — provisions that went further than previous constitutions in embedding religious identity into the state. A Council of Islamic Ideology was established to advise parliament on the compatibility of legislation with Islamic principles. These clauses, while reflecting the political realities of 1973, would later be used to justify more extensive Islamisation of the legal system.

The Balochistan Insurgency: Pakistan's Civil War

Even as the constitution was being celebrated, Pakistan was fighting a brutal insurgency in its largest and most resource-rich province. In February 1973, Bhutto dismissed the NAP-JUI coalition government of Chief Minister Ataullah Mengal in Balochistan, citing the discovery of a cache of arms at the Iraqi embassy in Islamabad that he claimed were destined for Baloch insurgents. Opposition politicians disputed the evidence as fabricated or planted.

The Baloch tribal insurgency that erupted in response was the most serious armed challenge to Pakistani state authority since 1971. The Baloch resistance, led by tribal sardars including Mir Sher Mohammad Marri and the Mengal tribe's forces, controlled significant territory in the remote mountains of the province. The insurgency drew on deep wells of Baloch grievance: the province had been providing Pakistan with enormous natural gas revenues since the discovery of the Sui gas field in 1952, yet remained the most underdeveloped province, with the lowest literacy rates and least infrastructure investment.

The Pakistan Army, supported by extraordinary assistance from Iran under Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi — who feared Baloch nationalism spreading to Iran's own sizable Baloch population — conducted large-scale counterinsurgency operations. Iranian Huey helicopter gunships flown by Iranian pilots fought against Pakistani citizens — a largely forgotten chapter of Cold War-era intervention. At its peak, over 80,000 army troops were deployed in Balochistan. Thousands were killed on both sides; tens of thousands of civilians were displaced from their villages.

The insurgency was eventually suppressed by 1977, but at enormous political and human cost. Bhutto's handling of Balochistan — dismissing an elected government, imprisoning its leaders in the Hyderabad Conspiracy Case, and conducting a military campaign against civilians — deepened the province's alienation from the Pakistani state to a degree that has never fully healed. Balochistan's grievances continue to fuel periodic insurgencies to the present day.

Pakistan's Nuclear Programme: The Strategic Decision

One of the most consequential decisions in Pakistan's history had been made in January 1972, when Bhutto convened the Multan meeting of Pakistan's top scientists and tasked them with developing a nuclear weapons capability. The emotional and strategic catalyst was the 1971 war: Bhutto was determined that Pakistan would never again face Indian military power without a credible deterrent.

By 1973, the nuclear programme was gaining momentum on two tracks: a plutonium reprocessing pathway at the Pakistan Atomic Energy Commission under Munir Ahmad Khan, and an increasingly important uranium enrichment pathway. A.Q. Khan, a metallurgical engineer who had been working at the URENCO uranium enrichment facility in Almelo, Netherlands — and had access to classified centrifuge designs — contacted Bhutto in 1974 offering to deliver enrichment capability. Bhutto accepted, and Khan was set up with the Engineering Research Laboratories (later KRL) at Kahuta, near Rawalpindi.

The nuclear programme required an elaborate international procurement network to acquire components unavailable domestically: high-strength steel alloys for centrifuges, ring magnets, vacuum pumps, and frequency converters. Pakistan established a web of front companies across Europe — particularly in Germany, Switzerland, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom — to acquire these materials. The programme cost enormous sums at a time when Pakistan could barely afford its import bill, but it was treated as a national security priority above all others.

Bhutto's Foreign Policy: The Islamic Bloc and Non-Alignment

In February 1974, Bhutto hosted the Second Islamic Summit Conference in Lahore — a major diplomatic achievement that brought together 37 Muslim heads of government and state. The summit established Pakistan's position as a leader in the Muslim world and confirmed Bhutto's stature as the most charismatic statesman in the Islamic world. Muammar Gaddafi of Libya, King Faisal of Saudi Arabia, King Hussein of Jordan, and Yasser Arafat of the PLO all attended.

At the Lahore summit, Pakistan formally recognised Bangladesh — more than two years after its creation. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman attended, marking the formal normalisation of relations. The recognition cleared the way for progress on the repatriation of Pakistani prisoners of war still held in India, resolved the status of Bengalis stranded in Pakistan, and closed this painful chapter of Pakistani history.

Bhutto also pursued a more independent foreign policy than his predecessors, seeking to balance the American alliance with relationships across the Muslim world, with China (the border friendship treaty of 1963 was deepened), and with the non-aligned movement. He was personally close to several Arab leaders and leveraged these relationships to secure oil and financial assistance during

Pakistan's recurring economic crises.

1974 Ahmadis Declared Non-Muslim; India's Nuclear Test

Bhutto Courts the Religious Right and Accelerates the Bomb

The Ahmadiyya Constitutional Amendment: Second Amendment

In September 1974, the National Assembly passed the Second Amendment to the constitution, declaring members of the Ahmadiyya community to be non-Muslims for the purposes of Pakistani law and constitution. The Ahmadis — followers of Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, a nineteenth-century religious reformer who claimed to be a subordinate prophet — had been a target of the religious establishment since Pakistan's founding. The anti-Ahmadiyya riots of 1953 had been the first major sectarian crisis; now, more than two decades later, the political pressure had finally succeeded in achieving a constitutional definition of apostasy.

The political context was deeply telling of how Bhutto governed. Facing mounting opposition, needing to shore up support among the religious parties he had previously dismissed as reactionaries, Bhutto conceded this demand in an act of pure political calculation. The amendment passed unanimously — including votes from members of parties that had positioned themselves as liberal and secular. In the charged atmosphere of 1974, no politician in Pakistan was willing to defend the constitutional rights of the Ahmadis.

The consequences were devastating and lasting. The Ahmadiyya community — which included prominent academics, scientists, civil servants, and military officers who had served Pakistan with distinction — now faced formal state discrimination. Subsequent ordinances in 1984 under Zia would make it a criminal offence for Ahmadis to call themselves Muslim, practise their faith openly, or use Islamic terminology. Thousands faced prosecution, imprisonment, and violence. Pakistan's Nobel laureate in Physics, Dr. Abdus Salam — an Ahmadi — eventually had his Muslim identity removed from his tombstone by court order.

India's Pokhran Nuclear Test: 'Smiling Buddha'

India's nuclear test at the Pokhran test range in Rajasthan on 18 May 1974 — officially described as a 'Peaceful Nuclear Explosion' and codenamed 'Smiling Buddha' — sent shockwaves through Pakistan's security establishment and the wider world. India had now demonstrated a nuclear weapons capability, radically altering the strategic balance in South Asia.

For Pakistan, the test confirmed what its security planners had feared: India was moving toward a nuclear deterrent and Pakistan would face a nuclear-armed adversary with which it had already fought three wars. Bhutto's response was to redouble the Pakistani nuclear effort with still greater urgency. The famous declaration — attributed to Bhutto — that Pakistanis would 'eat grass, even go hungry' if necessary to build the bomb captured the national mood.

The Pokhran test also triggered an international response that affected Pakistan. The United States, Canada, and other nuclear supplier states tightened export controls on nuclear-related technology and materials — the Nuclear Suppliers Group was established in 1974 partly as a response. This made Pakistan's clandestine procurement network more essential but also more risky. French negotiations for a plutonium reprocessing plant for Pakistan ultimately collapsed under American pressure in 1976.

Economic Challenges: Oil Shock and Nationalisation Consequences

The global oil price shock of 1973–74, triggered by the Arab oil embargo following the October 1973 Arab-Israeli war, dramatically increased Pakistan's import bill. Pakistan was almost entirely dependent on imported oil; the quadrupling of oil prices struck the economy hard, contributing to balance of payments difficulties and inflationary pressure.

Simultaneously, the consequences of Bhutto's nationalisation drive were becoming apparent. The nationalised industries were performing poorly, hampered by bureaucratic management, political interference in hiring, and lack of investment incentives. The nationalisation of cotton-ginning, rice-husking, and flour-milling industries in 1974 — covering small and medium agro-processors — proved particularly counterproductive, damaging a productive private sector without creating efficient public alternatives.

Foreign investment, already deterred by nationalisations, dried up further. The private sector — which Bhutto's rhetoric had consistently vilified as exploitative — was unwilling to invest in an environment where property rights seemed contingent on political favour. Pakistan's industrial growth rate slowed markedly from the levels achieved under Ayub Khan.

The Workers' Movement and Labour Unrest

Bhutto's labour reforms — trade union rights, workers' participation funds, minimum wage increases — had galvanised the urban working class. But the resulting wave of strikes and industrial unrest created problems for a government trying to attract investment and manage an already strained economy. Bhutto's response was characteristically ambivalent: sympathetic rhetoric toward workers combined with increasingly firm action to suppress strikes he deemed economically harmful.

The contradiction between Bhutto's populist promises and the economic realities of governing a developing country with limited resources was becoming impossible to sustain. Workers who had voted for the PPP expecting transformation found themselves facing the same economic constraints as before, while the business class that might have funded growth was alienated by nationalisations and political unpredictability.

1975 Political Repression and the Federal Security Force

Bhutto Tightens His Grip; Civil Liberties Erode

The Federal Security Force: Bhutto's Instrument of Repression

By 1975, Bhutto's government had built the Federal Security Force (FSF) into a formidable instrument of political repression. Established in 1972 ostensibly as an internal security force, the FSF operated under the Prime Minister's direct personal control, outside the normal chain of command that governed the army and police. Its director, Masood Mahmood, would later turn state's evidence against Bhutto in the murder trial.

The FSF's activities included surveillance of opposition politicians, intimidation of journalists, disruption of political meetings, and — most seriously — physical violence against opponents. Torture in FSF detention was reported and documented. The most notorious case was the alleged murder of Ahmad Raza Kasuri's father in 1974 in an assassination attempt targeting the opposition politician himself — the crime for which Bhutto was later convicted and hanged.

The existence of the FSF, and its activities, represented a fundamental betrayal of the democratic values Bhutto had championed. A Prime Minister who had come to power on a platform of ending military repression was now maintaining his own private security apparatus that operated with the same impunity as the worst excesses of the intelligence services he had criticised.

Banning the NAP and the Hyderabad Conspiracy Case

In February 1975, Bhutto took the politically drastic step of banning the National Awami Party (NAP), citing alleged secessionist activities and connections to foreign powers. The NAP's leadership — including the veteran Pakhtun nationalist Wali Khan (son of the revered Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan), Ataullah Mengal, and Ghaus Bakhsh Bizenjo — was arrested and charged with sedition in what became known as the Hyderabad Conspiracy Case.

The Hyderabad Conspiracy Case became a cause célèbre of Pakistani politics. The accused — many of them respected political figures with legitimate regional grievances — sat in a special court in Hyderabad for years, with no verdict ever delivered. The case was eventually withdrawn after Zia's coup in 1977. Its purpose, critics argued, was not to obtain convictions but to keep the opposition leadership imprisoned and neutralised.

The banning of the NAP and arrest of its leadership eliminated the most organised voice of Pakhtun and Baloch political aspirations from the political arena. It also demonstrated that Bhutto's federalism — for all the careful balance of the 1973 constitution — was in practice a disguised centralism that tolerated regional demands only when they did not challenge PPP primacy.

Press Freedom Under Bhutto

Bhutto's relationship with the press was deeply contradictory. He was himself a brilliant communicator who understood the power of the media, gave lively press conferences, and appreciated journalists of talent. Yet his government systematically undermined the independence of the press through a combination of formal and informal mechanisms.

Newsprint — essential for newspaper production — was government-controlled and could be allocated or withheld as a tool of political pressure. Advertising from government departments and

public enterprises was directed to friendly publications and withheld from critical ones. Journalists who pushed too hard faced personal consequences: arrest, physical intimidation, or professional ruin.

The Bhutto era saw the beginning of a pattern — continued and intensified under Zia — of state management of public information. Pakistan's traditionally vigorous press culture survived, but in an increasingly constrained form. The tradition of bold editorial independence that had characterised papers like Dawn was under sustained pressure.

Gulf Migration: A Social Transformation Begins

The mid-1970s saw the explosive growth of Pakistani labour migration to the Gulf states, a phenomenon that would reshape Pakistan's economy and society for decades. Hundreds of thousands of Pakistani workers — construction labourers, domestic workers, engineers, doctors, teachers, and drivers — migrated to Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Kuwait, Qatar, Libya, Bahrain, and Oman.

The oil wealth generated by the 1973 price shock had transformed the Gulf economies and created an insatiable demand for South Asian labour. Pakistan's government actively facilitated this migration, negotiating bilateral labour agreements and establishing the Overseas Employment Corporation. By the late 1970s, remittances from overseas Pakistanis had become a major source of foreign exchange, exceeding the value of several traditional export sectors.

The social consequences were profound and lasting. Remittance income funded house construction, raised living standards in Punjab and NWFP villages, and created a new middle class of returned migrants. But the exposure to Gulf — particularly Saudi — religious culture began to transform Pakistani Islam in a more conservative, Wahhabi-influenced direction. Mosques and madrassas funded with Gulf money spread a form of Islam unfamiliar to Pakistan's own Sufi-influenced religious traditions.

1976 The Gathering Storm: Opposition Unites

The Pakistan National Alliance Forms as Bhutto's Rule Falters

Formation of the Pakistan National Alliance

By 1976, Pakistan's political landscape had polarised dramatically. Bhutto remained popular with the rural poor and the working class, but had alienated the business community through nationalisations, the religious establishment through inconsistency, regional politicians through heavy-handedness in Balochistan and NWFP, and urban liberals through the FSF's repressive activities.

Nine opposition parties came together to form the Pakistan National Alliance (PNA) in January 1977, creating the broadest opposition coalition in Pakistan's history. The PNA included: Jamaat-e-Islami (the main religious party, led by Mian Tufail Muhammad); the Pakistan Muslim League (Qayyum); the Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam; the Jamiat Ulema-e-Pakistan; the National Democratic Party (successor to the banned NAP); the Tehrik-e-Istiqlal of Air Marshal Asghar Khan; and several smaller groups.

The ideological incoherence of the PNA — combining Islamists who wanted sharia law with secular nationalists who wanted liberal democracy — was held together solely by opposition to Bhutto. Its political platform was deliberately focused on process: restoring free elections and ending PPP authoritarianism, rather than on any specific policy programme. This made it a fragile coalition that would begin to fracture almost immediately after it achieved its initial goal of challenging Bhutto's rule.

The Kahuta Nuclear Programme: Procurement and Espionage

Through 1976, A.Q. Khan's team at Kahuta was making rapid progress on uranium enrichment centrifuge technology. Khan had brought detailed knowledge of the European URENCO enrichment programme and Pakistan was acquiring components through an elaborate network of front companies in Europe. Key items included high-strength maraging steel for centrifuge rotors, ring magnets, vacuum pumps, and frequency converters.

The American Carter administration, which came to power in January 1977, took a harder line on non-proliferation than the Ford administration. Washington placed intense pressure on Pakistan to abandon the enrichment programme, ultimately threatening to cut off economic and military assistance under the Symington Amendment. Pakistan's response was to deny, delay, and continue — a strategy that would prove successful as American strategic priorities shifted dramatically with the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.

France, which had been negotiating to sell Pakistan a plutonium reprocessing plant at Chashma, withdrew from the deal under intense American pressure in 1976 — a significant setback for the plutonium track of Pakistan's nuclear programme, but one that ultimately accelerated the uranium enrichment pathway.

Bhutto's Appointment of General Zia ul-Haq

In March 1976, Bhutto made what would prove to be the most consequential appointment of his political career: promoting General Muhammad Zia ul-Haq to the position of Army Chief of Staff, bypassing several more senior generals. Bhutto chose Zia precisely because he seemed unthreatening — a pious, professionally competent officer with no obvious political ambitions or

strong factional base.

Bhutto reportedly described Zia as 'my monkey' — a phrase attributed to him by various sources, though its precise authenticity is disputed. Whether or not Bhutto said this, it captured his dismissive assessment of Zia's political potential. It was a catastrophic misjudgment. Zia was far more calculating, patient, and politically sophisticated than his mild exterior suggested. He used his position as Army Chief to prepare carefully for the intervention that he would launch in July 1977.

1977 Rigged Elections, Mass Agitation, and the 5 July Coup

The End of Civilian Democracy and the Beginning of Zia's Rule

The March 1977 General Elections

General elections were held on 7 March 1977 — the second general elections in Pakistan's history to be conducted on the basis of direct adult franchise. The PPP won a landslide victory: 155 of 200 National Assembly seats, with its provincial assembly results equally overwhelming. The margin was so large as to be implausible.

The PNA immediately alleged massive and systematic rigging: stuffed ballot boxes, impersonation of voters, manipulation of result sheets, intimidation of polling agents, and in some cases simply fabricated results. The evidence for significant manipulation was substantial — even Bhutto's own supporters acknowledged that the elections were not clean, though they disputed the scale. International observers noted serious irregularities.

Bhutto's decision to rig the elections — if he made such a decision, which he denied — was particularly self-defeating. The PPP would almost certainly have won a free and fair election: it had genuine popular support, an organisational advantage, and the resources of incumbency. By producing results too lopsided to be credible, Bhutto destroyed the mandate he had sought to confirm and handed the opposition a devastating propaganda weapon.

The PNA Movement: Pakistan's Second Mass Uprising

The PNA's response to the election results was immediate and massive. Calling the elections a fraud, the PNA refused to take its seats in the new assemblies and launched a civil disobedience campaign across the country. The movement was initially strongest in Lahore and other Punjab cities, then spread nationwide. Hartals (general strikes) brought commercial life to a standstill for days at a time. Massive demonstrations filled city centres.

The religious parties within the PNA gave the movement a distinctive Islamist character. The slogan 'Nizam-e-Mustafa' (the System of the Prophet) resonated powerfully in an atmosphere already shaped by Bhutto's Ahmadiyya amendment and Zia's imminent Islamisation agenda. Friday prayers became political mobilising events. The movement blended genuine democratic demands with an Islamist political programme in ways that would be characteristic of Pakistani opposition politics for decades.

Bhutto declared martial law in Karachi, Lahore, and Hyderabad and deployed the army to restore order. Several hundred people were killed in clashes between protesters and security forces. By June, the situation had deteriorated so badly that Bhutto entered serious negotiations with the PNA. An agreement appeared close — fresh elections were to be called, with the disputed results set aside. But the military had already decided.

5 July 1977: Operation Fair Play — Zia's Coup

In the early hours of 5 July 1977, General Muhammad Zia ul-Haq launched Operation Fair Play with the arrest of Bhutto and most of his cabinet, along with PNA leaders. Troops occupied key installations in all major cities. Radio Pakistan announced the imposition of martial law and the suspension of the constitution. The coup was swift, professionally executed, and — critically —

bloodless.

Zia's initial statement struck a carefully moderate tone: he was intervening to save Pakistan from civil war, elections would be held within 90 days, and power would be transferred to elected representatives. These assurances were accepted by many Pakistanis exhausted by months of political crisis. Even some PNA leaders — having been released quickly and promised elections — initially cooperated with Zia.

The coup's initial public reception was not uniformly negative. Many Pakistanis, including significant elements of the urban middle class, were genuinely relieved that the political crisis was over. The business community was pleased. The religious parties, which had provided much of the agitation's energy, saw Zia's devout Islamic persona as a guarantee of their interests. This acquiescence — even enthusiasm in some quarters — was a deeply troubling sign of how much confidence in democratic politics had eroded.

> *"My sole aim is to organise free and fair elections which would be held in October this year. I give my word that as soon as elections are held, I will transfer power to the elected representatives and go back to the barracks."*
>
> *— General Muhammad Zia ul-Haq, 5 July 1977 — a promise broken for 11 years*

Bhutto's Arrest, Release, and Re-Arrest

Bhutto was initially detained, then released in late July 1977 after Zia calculated that keeping him imprisoned was creating sympathy. Bhutto immediately began campaigning vigorously for the elections Zia had promised, drawing enormous crowds and demonstrating that he remained the most powerful political figure in Pakistan. This display of popular support alarmed both Zia and elements of the military who had hoped Bhutto would fade from the political scene.

In September 1977, Bhutto was rearrested on charges of conspiracy to murder Ahmad Raza Kasuri's father — an alleged FSF operation in November 1974 in which the politician's father had been killed while Kasuri himself escaped. The charges drew heavily on testimony from Masood Mahmood, the FSF director who had turned state's evidence. Bhutto was denied bail. The trial before the Lahore High Court began in October 1977.

1978 Zia Consolidates Power; Islamisation Begins; Bhutto on Trial

The Judicial Drama Reaches Its Climax Against a Backdrop of Legal Revolution

Zia ul-Haq Assumes the Presidency

In September 1978, Zia ul-Haq added the office of President of Pakistan to his positions of Chief Martial Law Administrator and Army Chief of Staff. The formal assumption of the presidency — vacated when Fazal Elahi Chaudhry's term expired — completed the concentration of all state power in Zia's hands. He was simultaneously head of state, head of government, supreme commander of the armed forces, and the source of all legislative authority under martial law.

With his position consolidated, Zia felt secure enough to begin the programme of Islamisation that had always been his deeper political project, distinct from the purely power-seeking agenda of his coup. Zia was genuinely devout — not merely performing religiosity for political purposes — and he had a coherent vision of transforming Pakistan into an Islamic state that implemented the Sharia.

The Hudood Ordinances: Islamising the Penal Code

In February 1979, Zia promulgated the Hudood Ordinances — five ordinances prescribing Islamic punishments (hudood) for specific offences. The Offence of Zina (Enforcement of Hudood) Ordinance dealt with adultery and fornication; the Offence Against Property Ordinance provided for amputation for theft; the Prohibition Order prohibited alcohol; the Qazf (False Accusation of Zina) Ordinance dealt with false accusations; and the Execution of Punishment of Whipping Ordinance regularised flogging.

The Zina Ordinance had the most devastating practical consequences. Under its provisions, sex outside marriage was a criminal offence. A woman who reported rape could find herself charged with zina — fornication — if she could not produce four male Muslim witnesses to the assault or if her accusation was not believed. The burden of proof for rape was effectively placed on the victim. Thousands of women, many of them rape victims or women fleeing abusive marriages, were imprisoned under the ordinance in the years that followed.

The practical application of the classical Islamic punishments (amputation for theft, stoning for adultery) was rare, as the evidentiary requirements were extremely demanding. But the flogging provisions were applied regularly — political protesters, alcoholics, and those convicted of various social offences were publicly flogged under the new ordinances. The spectacle of public flogging returned to Pakistani streets for the first time in the modern era.

The Lahore High Court Verdict on Bhutto

The Lahore High Court concluded Bhutto's trial in March 1978, convicting him of conspiracy to murder and sentencing him to death. The verdict was delivered by a five-judge bench; four judges voted for conviction, one dissented. The case drew on testimony from Masood Mahmood (FSF director), Arshad Iqbal and Rana Iftikhar (FSF operatives), and other witnesses whose credibility was contested.

The trial was procedurally flawed in ways that independent legal observers documented extensively. The judges were allegedly subject to government pressure. Bhutto's defence team was harassed. Access to evidence was limited. Several requests for delay to prepare the defence were

denied. The entire context — a military government prosecuting the man it had overthrown for a crime allegedly committed while he was in power — made it impossible to regard the proceedings as genuinely independent.

Bhutto's own conduct during the trial was remarkable for its defiance. From the dock, he delivered lengthy, eloquent denunciations of Zia, the military, and the international powers he accused of engineering his downfall. Whether guilty or not, he used the trial as a political platform with characteristic brilliance. His written statement — submitted to the Supreme Court — was a major political document that circulated widely in samizdat form.

Islamisation of Education and Public Life

Zia's Islamisation extended into every sphere of public life. The education system was overhauled to make Islamic studies compulsory at all levels. Textbooks were rewritten to give Pakistan's history a more Islamically oriented narrative — the pre-Islamic South Asian past was downgraded and the Islamic identity of Pakistan's founding was emphasised to the point of distortion. The study of Islamiyat (Islamic studies) became a prerequisite for government employment.

University campuses were transformed. The Islami Jamiat-e-Tulaba (IJT), the student wing of Jamaat-e-Islami, was given effective control of many campuses through a combination of government favour and physical intimidation of rival student groups. Secular and leftist student organisations — which had been the nursery of progressive political talent for decades — were suppressed. The intellectual and political culture of Pakistani universities was permanently damaged.

Television was brought under strict Islamic guidelines. Women presenters were required to cover their heads; music was limited; Western content was reduced. Public spaces were policed for Islamic observance. The call to prayer became the organising principle of the public day.

1979 Bhutto Hanged; Iran's Revolution; Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan

Three Events in One Year That Changed Pakistan and the World

4 April 1979: The Execution of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto

The Supreme Court of Pakistan, in a 4-3 majority judgment delivered in February 1979, upheld the Lahore High Court's death sentence on Zulfikar Ali Bhutto. The three dissenting judges — Justices Haleem, Safdar Shah, and Dorab Patel — found the evidence insufficient and the trial procedurally flawed. Their dissents were powerful legal arguments that many Pakistani and international lawyers found more convincing than the majority opinion.

World leaders including US President Jimmy Carter, UK Prime Minister James Callaghan, Chinese Vice Premier Li Xiannian, and Saudi King Khalid submitted clemency appeals to Zia. The United Nations Human Rights Commission expressed concern. Amnesty International and other human rights organisations campaigned vigorously for clemency. Zia rejected all appeals.

Zulfikar Ali Bhutto was hanged at Rawalpindi Central Jail in the early hours of 4 April 1979. He was 51 years old. The execution was carried out without advance notice to his family, denying them a final visit. His body was flown by military aircraft to his ancestral home in Larkana, Sindh, for burial beside his father Shah Nawaz Bhutto.

The political consequences were vast and enduring. For millions of Pakistanis — particularly in Sindh, where Bhutto remained a messianic figure — the execution was judicial murder by a military dictator. The PPP transferred its loyalties to Bhutto's 25-year-old daughter Benazir, whose political career would be defined by her father's legacy and her efforts to return Pakistan to democratic rule. Bhutto's execution poisoned the relationship between the PPP and the military for generations.

> *"They can imprison me, they can torture me, they can even kill me. But they cannot kill the idea of a free and democratic Pakistan."*
>
> *— Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, from Rawalpindi jail, 1979*

The Iranian Revolution and Its Impact on Pakistan

The Iranian Revolution of February 1979, which overthrew Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi and established Ayatollah Khomeini's Islamic Republic, was an event of profound significance for Pakistan and the Muslim world. For Zia, the revolution was ideologically validating — it demonstrated that an Islamic government could actually be established in a modern state. But it also introduced a dangerous sectarian dimension.

The Iranian revolutionary government actively promoted Shia Islam throughout the Muslim world and provided funding and support to Pakistan's Shia minority — approximately 20% of Pakistan's population. Saudi Arabia, alarmed by Iranian revolutionary influence, responded by dramatically increasing its funding of Sunni Deobandi and Wahhabi religious organisations and madrassas in Pakistan. Pakistan became a battleground for an Iranian-Saudi proxy sectarian war that would claim thousands of lives through the 1980s and beyond.

Pakistan's Shia community, energised by events in Iran, organised more assertively. When Zia attempted to apply the zakat (Islamic alms tax) to Shia property in 1980 — using a Sunni jurisprudential basis that Shia doctrine did not recognise — the Shia community staged massive

protests and forced Zia to exempt them. It was a rare victory for civil society against the Zia regime, but it also deepened Sunni-Shia tensions.

27 December 1979: The Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan

The Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan on 27 December 1979 transformed Pakistan's strategic situation overnight. Soviet forces entered Afghanistan — initially 85,000 troops, eventually over 100,000 — to prop up a communist government facing a growing Islamic insurgency. The invasion brought the Cold War directly to Pakistan's western border.

For Pakistan, the Soviet invasion was simultaneously a genuine security threat and an extraordinary strategic opportunity. The threat was real: the Soviet military was now deployed along Pakistan's border with Afghanistan, raising fears of further southward expansion toward the warm waters of the Indian Ocean. Pakistani strategists drew on historical memories of Russian expansion in Central Asia.

The opportunity was equally real. Pakistan — specifically the ISI under General Akhtar Abdur Rahman, who reported directly to Zia — became the indispensable conduit for the American and Saudi operation to arm and supply the Afghan mujahideen. The CIA's Operation Cyclone, run through the ISI, would become the largest covert operation in American history up to that point. Pakistan acquired the status of frontline state, which brought immediate cancellation of American non-proliferation pressure, massive economic and military aid, and diplomatic support.

The Carter administration's initial $400 million aid offer to Pakistan was famously dismissed by Zia as 'peanuts' — he held out for a more substantial package. The Reagan administration, which took office in January 1981, was far more forthcoming: a six-year $3.2 billion package, including F-16 aircraft, was announced. Pakistan's strategic importance had made it too valuable to pressure on nuclear non-proliferation or human rights.

Pakistan in 1979
Head of State: General Zia ul-Haq (President and CMLA) | Bhutto executed: 4 April 1979 | Iran: Islamic Republic established February 1979 | Soviet troops in Afghanistan: ~100,000 (Dec 1979 onwards) | Hudood Ordinances: in force from February 1979 | Nuclear programme: active and accelerating at Kahuta

1980 The Afghan Jihad Economy; Refugees; Drugs and Weapons

Pakistan Is Transformed by the Consequences of Its Strategic Choice

The Afghan Jihad Support Infrastructure

Through 1980, Pakistan and the United States built the infrastructure for what would become the largest covert military operation of the Cold War. The ISI's Inter-Services Intelligence S-Wing, under the direction of General Akhtar Abdur Rahman, established the supply chain: weapons were shipped to the Pakistani port of Karachi, transported by army trucks to ISI depots in Rawalpindi and Peshawar, then distributed to mujahideen commanders through a system that the ISI controlled entirely.

The weapons initially supplied were deliberately chosen to be of Soviet or Soviet-compatible types — AK-47s, RPGs, DShK heavy machine guns — so that Pakistani and American involvement could be plausibly denied. As the programme expanded, more sophisticated equipment was added: anti-tank missiles, mortars, and eventually Stinger surface-to-air missiles (from 1986). Saudi Arabia matched American funding dollar-for-dollar, so the total resources available were effectively doubled.

The ISI's control over weapons distribution gave it enormous power over the Afghan resistance. By choosing which commanders received weapons and funds, the ISI was effectively deciding the political future of Afghanistan. Zia and Akhtar strongly favoured the Islamist parties — particularly Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's Hizb-e-Islami — over traditional tribal leaders and moderate nationalists. This preference for radical Islamists would have catastrophic consequences for Afghanistan after the Soviet withdrawal.

The Afghan Refugee Crisis: Scale and Consequences

The Soviet invasion triggered the largest refugee crisis since Pakistan's own Partition. By the end of 1980, over a million Afghan refugees had crossed into Pakistan; by the mid-1980s the number exceeded three million — the largest refugee population in the world at that time. The refugees settled primarily in the North-West Frontier Province and Balochistan, transforming the demographics and culture of both provinces.

The UNHCR and a large network of international NGOs established relief operations across dozens of refugee camps. The largest — Nasir Bagh, Jalozai, Shamshatoo, and others near Peshawar — housed hundreds of thousands of people. International aid, largely channelled through Pakistan, amounted to hundreds of millions of dollars annually and provided significant economic stimulus to the frontier provinces.

The refugee camps served multiple functions simultaneously: humanitarian shelters, recruiting and training grounds for the mujahideen, and bases for the political organisations of the seven Pakistan-based Afghan resistance parties. The distinction between refugee and combatant was often blurred. Young Afghan men moved between camp life and active combat with frequency.

The long-term social impact on Pakistan was profound and largely negative. The Pashtun tribal society of NWFP was transformed by the influx of refugees sharing a similar ethnicity but a more war-hardened, conservative religious outlook. Weapons — particularly Kalashnikovs — became ubiquitous in frontier areas. The heroin trade, which followed the expansion of Afghan opium

cultivation (partly encouraged by CIA indifference to mujahideen drug financing), created Pakistan's heroin epidemic of the 1980s.

Zia's Political Consolidation: Managing Without Elections

With elections indefinitely postponed, Zia needed mechanisms for political management beyond pure military coercion. He pursued several strategies: co-opting religious parties through the Islamisation programme; managing business elites through economic liberalisation (a partial reversal of Bhutto's nationalisations); supporting a conservative press; and building personal relationships with tribal and feudal power-holders.

The political parties were banned from formal organisation, but individual politicians were allowed to operate as individuals. Zia cultivated a network of politicians — many of them former PPP members or regional notables — who were willing to work within his framework. This network of 'electables' would form the base of the political system after the 1985 elections.

Local body elections were held on a non-party basis in 1979 and again in 1983, maintaining a level of participatory politics at the grassroots while preventing the mobilisation of national party politics. These elections strengthened local power-holders — landlords, tribal chiefs, biraderi (clan) leaders — at the expense of ideology-based political parties.

1981 The Movement for Restoration of Democracy; Benazir Emerges

Civil Society Organises Against Zia Despite Brutal Repression

The Movement for Restoration of Democracy (MRD)

In February 1981, eight political parties formed the Movement for Restoration of Democracy (MRD) — the most significant organised opposition to Zia's rule. The MRD included the PPP (the dominant component), various Muslim League factions, the Tehrik-e-Istiqlal, and several regional parties. Its demands were clear: immediate transfer of power to elected representatives, restoration of the 1973 constitution, release of political prisoners, and end of martial law.

The MRD operated under severe structural constraints. Political activity was banned; party offices were closed by government order; public meetings of more than a few people required permission that was routinely denied. Activists who defied these restrictions faced arrest under martial law regulations that bypassed normal judicial procedure. Flogging sentences were handed down by summary military courts. Several MRD leaders spent extended periods in prison.

Despite these constraints, the MRD maintained organisational coherence and continued to articulate an alternative political vision. Its persistent existence demonstrated that Zia's authoritarianism could not entirely suppress political society, even if it could prevent effective political challenge. The MRD also served the important function of maintaining international attention on Pakistan's democratic deficit.

Benazir Bhutto: The Symbol of Democratic Resistance

Benazir Bhutto had returned to Pakistan from her Oxford and Harvard education after her father's arrest in 1977. Through her father's trial and execution she had been repeatedly imprisoned and confined to house arrest. By 1981, at the age of 28, she was the acknowledged leader of the PPP — less by formal appointment than by the overwhelming emotional transfer of the party's loyalties from father to daughter.

Benazir spent much of 1981 in various forms of detention. She was held in Sihala rest house near Islamabad, then in solitary confinement in Sukkur jail in Sindh's interior desert — conditions that were deliberately harsh and that damaged her health. The isolation and physical hardship she endured built an international profile that would serve her political career enormously. Western politicians, feminists, and human rights activists took up her cause.

Benazir's imprisonment also hardened her politically. The naive idealism of her Oxford years was replaced by a steelier, more calculating understanding of power. She emerged from her imprisonment with the moral authority of a martyr and the political education of a prisoner — a combination that would make her a formidable political operator.

The PIA Hijacking and Al-Zulfikar

In March 1981, a Pakistan International Airlines Boeing 720 flying from Karachi to Peshawar was hijacked by members of Al-Zulfikar — a militant organisation founded by Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's sons Murtaza and Shahnawaz from exile in Afghanistan with Afghan and Libyan support. The hijackers demanded the release of 55 PPP political prisoners.

The 13-day ordeal — during which a Pakistani military cadet was killed and his body thrown onto the tarmac — ended in Damascus, Syria, with Pakistan releasing 55 prisoners and the hijackers escaping with Libyan assistance. The hijacking was a political disaster for the PPP: Zia used it to justify harsher crackdowns on PPP activities and to discredit the Bhutto family. Benazir and the mainstream PPP leadership condemned the hijacking, but the association with political violence damaged their standing.

The US-Pakistan Alliance Formalised: $3.2 Billion Package

The Reagan administration formalised its partnership with Pakistan through a six-year economic and military assistance package worth $3.2 billion, announced in 1981. The package included 40 F-16 Fighting Falcon fighter aircraft — the most advanced combat aircraft Pakistan had ever operated — along with A-7 attack aircraft, armoured personnel carriers, and other military equipment.

The F-16 deal was of particular significance. The aircraft gave Pakistan Air Force a significant qualitative advantage over India's air force for the first time, and the F-16's potential nuclear delivery capability was not lost on either side. The deal was also significant for what it excluded: any meaningful pressure on Pakistan's nuclear programme. The annual presidential certification that Pakistan did not possess a nuclear device — required by American law — was increasingly fictional, but it allowed the strategic relationship to continue.

1982 Islamisation Deepens; Economic Growth and Its Shadow

Zia's Legal Revolution Continues While the Economy Performs

The Federal Shariat Court and Islamic Legal Reforms

The Federal Shariat Court, established in 1980 and given expanded jurisdiction in 1982, became the institutional centre of Zia's legal Islamisation. The court had the unprecedented power to examine any law in Pakistan and declare it 'repugnant to the injunctions of Islam' — a power that could in theory override any act of parliament. It created a parallel legal system superimposed on Pakistan's existing common law framework.

The Shariat Court's practical impact was uneven: on some matters it was restrained; on others it issued sweeping judgments that dramatically altered the law. One of its most significant areas of activity was the Islamisation of banking: the court declared interest (riba) to be un-Islamic and ordered its elimination from Pakistan's financial system. The replacement of conventional banking with 'Islamic finance' instruments (profit-and-loss sharing, mark-up schemes) created an entire parallel financial architecture of dubious practical effectiveness.

The Blasphemy Laws Strengthened

Section 295-B was added to the Pakistan Penal Code in 1982, making the deliberate defiling, damaging, or desecration of the Quran a crime punishable by life imprisonment. Combined with the existing Section 295-A (deliberate acts to outrage religious feelings) and the later addition of 295-C (blasphemy against the Prophet, death penalty, added in 1986), these provisions created a legal framework that would be systematically abused as a tool of religious persecution.

The blasphemy laws were primarily used against religious minorities — Ahmadis, Christians, and Hindus — as well as against Muslims accused of heterodox beliefs. False accusations were common, motivated by personal disputes, commercial rivalries, and sectarian animosity. The mere accusation of blasphemy was often sufficient to trigger mob violence before any judicial process could take place. Accused individuals and their families faced death threats that the state was often unwilling or unable to prevent.

The Qanoon-e-Shahadat: Evidence Law Reforms

The Law of Evidence (Qanoon-e-Shahadat) of 1984 introduced Islamic principles into Pakistan's law of evidence, with particularly significant provisions regarding the weight to be given to women's testimony. In certain financial matters, the testimony of two women was made equivalent to that of one man. The practical effect in courts — where judges interpreted these provisions inconsistently — was to create uncertainty about the equality of legal standing between men and women.

Women activists and lawyers organised sustained resistance to these discriminatory laws through the Women's Action Forum (WAF), established in 1981. WAF protests — marches, sit-ins, petitions, public statements — were broken up by police with lathis (batons). Several leading lawyers and activists were beaten. The courage of these women in confronting the Zia regime was remarkable and represents one of the most honourable chapters in Pakistani civil society history.

Economic Performance: The Aid-Driven Boom

The Zia era was paradoxically a period of significant macroeconomic growth. GDP growth averaged 6–7% annually through the early 1980s, driven by American and Saudi strategic aid, workers' remittances from the Gulf (which reached $3 billion annually by the mid-1980s), and the economic stimulus of the Afghan war-related expenditure. Foreign exchange reserves recovered from their critically low levels under Bhutto.

Zia partially reversed Bhutto's nationalisations, returning some industries to private ownership and creating a more favourable environment for private investment. Industrial growth, though modest, resumed. The agriculture sector performed well, benefiting from continued Green Revolution effects and government investment in irrigation infrastructure.

The growth was, however, built on fragile and distorting foundations: foreign aid, remittances, and war-related economic activity rather than sustainable domestic investment and institutional development. It also failed to address Pakistan's structural inequalities — the feudal land system, the educational deficit, the health infrastructure gap — that would prove more durable than any economic boom.

1983 The Sindh Uprising; Sectarian Violence; Opposition Survives

The Most Serious Challenge to Zia's Rule Is Suppressed in Blood

The MRD Agitation of August 1983: Sindh Rises

In August 1983, the MRD launched the most serious and sustained challenge to Zia's rule — a mass uprising that was particularly intense in rural Sindh, where Bhutto's memory remained most powerful and the PPP's organisational roots ran deepest. The movement began on 14 August (Pakistan's independence anniversary) and continued for several weeks, engulfing entire districts.

The scale of the uprising in interior Sindh was remarkable. In districts like Larkana, Khairpur, Sukkur, and Jacobabad, the rural population effectively expelled government authority. Police posts were attacked, government vehicles burned, and local PPP activists organised shadow administrations. Roads and railway lines were blocked. For brief periods, it appeared as though entire districts had slipped outside government control.

The government's response was ferocious. Army troops were deployed across Sindh. According to various estimates, several hundred people were killed in the crackdown; thousands were arrested and imprisoned; large numbers were flogged by summary military courts. In some areas, helicopter gunships were used against civilian demonstrators. The suppression was effective militarily but deepened Sindhi grievances against what was perceived as a Punjabi-dominated military state.

Why the MRD Failed to Topple Zia

The MRD agitation of 1983, despite its intensity in Sindh, failed to topple the Zia regime for several reasons. First, the movement was geographically concentrated: Punjab — the most populous province and the heartland of the army's recruitment base — did not rise. Without Punjab, no movement could threaten the military's fundamental stability.

Second, the movement lacked the ability to bring economic pressure to bear on the government in the way that Bhutto's 1968–69 movement had done. The urban commercial classes, who might have provided that pressure, were not sufficiently alienated from Zia's generally business-friendly economic policies.

Third, the Afghan war context gave Zia a diplomatic insulation that Bhutto had not enjoyed: the United States, which was Pakistan's most important international patron, was not going to destabilise a regime it needed for the anti-Soviet jihad. Western human rights pressure on Pakistan was muted by Cold War considerations.

Sectarian Violence: The Shia-Sunni Conflict Erupts

The early 1980s saw organised sectarian violence emerge as a major social problem in Pakistan. The Iranian Revolution had energised Pakistan's Shia community; Saudi Arabia was massively funding Sunni organisations. In the summer of 1983, Pakistan experienced its first serious outbreak of large-scale Shia-Sunni violence in Karachi and in parts of NWFP. Mosques were attacked, processions ambushed, and members of both communities killed.

Zia's response to sectarian violence was complicated by his own Islamisation agenda. The Sunni Deobandi and Wahhabi organisations that were most aggressively anti-Shia were also among the religious forces that supported his Islamisation programme and the Afghan jihad. He could not

crack down on them without undermining his own political and strategic base.

The weapons flooding into Pakistan from the Afghan war made sectarian violence increasingly deadly. Kalashnikovs and other military weapons were available in the arms bazaars of the frontier province at minimal cost. Sectarian assassination squads, funded by Iranian and Saudi money respectively, began systematic campaigns against the other community's religious leadership.

The Kalashnikov Culture and the Heroin Epidemic

By 1983, the social consequences of Pakistan's role in the Afghan war were becoming undeniable in NWFP and Balochistan. The term 'Kalashnikov culture' entered Pakistani discourse to describe the normalisation of automatic weapons in public life. Soviet-era Kalashnikovs, RPGs, and other weapons — leaking from the vast quantities being channelled to the mujahideen — were available in the bazaars of Darra Adam Khel and other frontier arms-manufacturing towns at prices equivalent to a week's wages.

The heroin epidemic was equally devastating. Afghan opium production had expanded massively under the conditions of war — with CIA acquiescence, since cutting off mujahideen drug income would have complicated the anti-Soviet operation. Pakistani traffickers refined Afghan opium into heroin and distributed it through networks that extended across Pakistan and into Europe. Pakistan, which had had almost no heroin addicts in 1979, had over a million by the mid-1980s — one of the most rapid drug epidemics in modern history.

The ISI's central role in the Afghan weapons pipeline meant that it was aware of, and in some cases implicated in, the drug trade that used the same logistical routes. The boundary between the institutional ISI and individuals within it who profited from the drug trade was never clearly drawn. This ambiguity would haunt Pakistan's relationship with the international community for decades.

Civil Society Resistance: Lawyers, Women, and Journalists

Despite the repressive conditions, Pakistani civil society demonstrated remarkable resilience through the early 1980s. The legal profession was particularly prominent in organised resistance. Bar associations across Pakistan passed resolutions condemning martial law, the Hudood Ordinances, and the subordination of the judiciary to executive authority. The Supreme Court Bar Association and provincial bar associations provided institutional frameworks for political opposition that could not easily be closed down.

Women's organisations — particularly the Women's Action Forum, established in Lahore in 1981 — organised public demonstrations, petitions, and legal challenges to the discriminatory laws introduced under Zia. The courage of women who marched in Lahore and Karachi, were beaten by police, and returned the next day was a defining feature of this period.

Journalism, while constrained by censorship, continued to push boundaries. Publications like Dawn, the Muslim (later renamed The News), and various Urdu dailies maintained editorial positions that implicitly or explicitly criticised government policies. Individual journalists — Hamid Mir, Najam Sethi, and others who would later become prominent — began their careers in this period, developing the skills of circumspect but pointed commentary that the conditions demanded.

Additional Context: Pakistan's Social Transformation in the Zia Decade

How Islamisation Reshaped Pakistani Society From the Grassroots Up

The Madrassa Explosion

One of the most profound and lasting consequences of the Zia era was the dramatic expansion of Pakistan's madrassa (Islamic seminary) sector. In 1947, Pakistan had approximately 900 madrassas. By 1988, when Zia died, the number had grown to over 8,000. The growth was driven by three factors: Saudi and Gulf funding for religious education, the government's promotion of Islamic education, and the Afghan war's creation of demand for religious warriors.

The madrassas provided free education, food, and accommodation to students from poor families who could not afford state schools — or who lived in areas where state schools did not exist or functioned poorly. For millions of Pakistani families, the madrassa was not a pathway to militancy but a practical solution to educational deprivation.

However, a significant subset of madrassas — particularly those affiliated with the Deobandi school and funded by Gulf money — provided an education that combined religious instruction with a militant Islamist worldview. These institutions became the primary source of recruits for the Afghan jihad and, later, for Pakistan's own militant organisations. The long-term consequences for Pakistani society — the normalisation of extremist interpretations of Islam among a significant minority — were severe.

The Transformation of Pakistani Islam

The Pakistan that existed in 1973 had a predominantly Sufi-influenced, pluralistic, and relatively tolerant popular religious culture. Shrines of saints were centres of community life. The Islam practised by ordinary Pakistanis — particularly in rural Punjab and Sindh — was syncretic, incorporating pre-Islamic local customs and emphasising the intercession of saints (a concept that puritanical Islam condemned as shirk, polytheism).

By 1985, twelve years of Zia's Islamisation and Gulf-funded religious activity had begun to transform this culture. Wahhabi and Deobandi influence, transmitted through madrassas, returned migrants from Saudi Arabia, and government educational policy, was challenging the Sufi mainstream. Shrine culture was dismissed by a growing minority as un-Islamic. Women's public presence was increasingly questioned. Inter-faith interaction became more fraught.

This transformation was not uniform or complete: Pakistan's Sufi traditions remained resilient and the majority of Pakistanis continued to practise a tolerant, syncretic Islam. But the minority of more conservative and potentially militant religious views had grown significantly in both absolute size and institutional representation.

Economic Inequality and the Rural-Urban Divide

While Pakistan's macroeconomic indicators showed growth through the early 1980s, the distribution of the gains was deeply unequal. The feudal land system in Sindh and southern Punjab — which Bhutto's land reforms had barely touched and Zia had no interest in reforming — meant that large landowners continued to capture the majority of agricultural gains. Tenant farmers, sharecroppers, and agricultural labourers remained trapped in semi-feudal arrangements.

Urban-rural disparities were stark: Karachi, Lahore, and other major cities had modern hospitals, universities, and infrastructure; large parts of rural Sindh, Balochistan, and even NWFP had little access to basic services. The literacy rate, while improving, remained low — particularly for women in rural areas — and the quality of public education was declining as resources were diverted to the madrassa sector.

The remittance economy brought prosperity to many Punjab and NWFP villages, funding house construction and consumer goods. But it also created dependency on volatile oil-price cycles, and the social disruption caused by large-scale male migration — women managing households alone, children growing up without fathers, communities partially emptied — was rarely acknowledged in economic analyses.

The Military Institution Under Zia: Expansion and Islamisation

The Pakistan Army under Zia underwent significant institutional transformation. Its size expanded: the regular army grew from approximately 400,000 in 1977 to over 500,000 by the mid-1980s, funded by American military aid and the demands of the Afghan war support role. Zia deliberately promoted officers of Islamist inclination, changing the culture of an institution that had previously been more secular and British-influenced in its officer corps.

The Afghan operation massively expanded the power and autonomy of the ISI. From a primarily domestic intelligence organisation, it became a major operational agency managing billion-dollar weapons programmes, running refugee camp networks, and shaping the political future of a neighbouring country. Its budget and manpower grew accordingly, and its institutional self-confidence reached new heights.

The Army's role in running the Afghan jihad also gave it experience in covert operations, proxy warfare, and regional strategic manipulation that would be applied — with mixed results — in subsequent decades. The 'strategic depth' doctrine — the idea that Pakistan needed a friendly Afghanistan to provide strategic space in a war with India — became embedded in military thinking during this period.

1984 The Referendum Farce; Nuclear Advances; Afghan War Intensifies

Zia Manufactures Legitimacy While Pakistan Approaches the Nuclear Threshold

The December 1984 Referendum: Democracy Mocked

In December 1984, Zia held a national referendum asking voters whether they supported the 'process of Islamisation' his government had been implementing. The question was deliberately framed so that a 'yes' vote would be interpreted as endorsement of Zia as President for a further five-year term — a constitutional sleight of hand that the opposition and independent legal scholars condemned as fraudulent and without constitutional basis.

All opposition parties, the bar associations, and civil society organisations boycotted the referendum. Voting was held on the basis of the electoral rolls, which were outdated and incomplete. Government machinery was used to encourage turnout and a 'yes' vote. The official results claimed a turnout of over 60% and a 'yes' vote of 97.7% — figures that no independent observer found credible. Actual turnout, based on numerous journalistic accounts from polling stations, appeared to be in single digits in many areas.

Zia used the referendum result to claim a new five-year presidential mandate and to legitimise his continued rule. It was a particularly transparent piece of political theatre that fooled no one — but Zia calculated, correctly, that international reaction would be muted given Pakistan's strategic role in Afghanistan. The episode illustrated both Zia's contempt for democratic norms and his acute awareness that maintaining some facade of legitimacy was necessary.

The Ahmadiyya Ordinance XX: Criminalising Faith

In April 1984, Zia promulgated Ordinance XX, which made it a criminal offence for members of the Ahmadiyya community to call themselves Muslims, to call their places of worship mosques, to use the azan (call to prayer), or to use Islamic greetings. The ordinance prescribed imprisonment of up to three years for these 'offences.'

Ordinance XX was the most extreme of the series of anti-Ahmadiyya measures extending back to the 1953 riots and the 1974 constitutional amendment. It effectively criminalised the practice of the Ahmadiyya faith as Ahmadis understood it, since their self-identification as Muslims was central to their religious identity. Human rights organisations worldwide condemned the ordinance as a fundamental violation of religious freedom.

Pakistan's Nobel laureate in Physics, Dr. Abdus Salam — an Ahmadi who had dedicated his life to Pakistan's scientific advancement and had founded the International Centre for Theoretical Physics in Trieste — was among those affected. The deteriorating conditions for Ahmadis in Pakistan under Zia contributed to Salam's increasing estrangement from Pakistan in the final decades of his life.

Benazir Bhutto in Exile; International Opposition Work

Benazir Bhutto left Pakistan in January 1984, after years of intermittent imprisonment and house arrest, to seek medical treatment in Europe. She would not return until April 1986. From her base in London, she reorganised the PPP's international structures, wrote her memoir 'Daughter of the East', lobbied Western governments and parliaments, and built the international profile that would eventually facilitate her political return.

The death of her brother Shahnawaz in mysterious circumstances at his apartment on the French Riviera in July 1985 deepened the Bhutto family's sense of persecution and added to the mythology of the family as martyrs to Pakistani democracy. Pakistani government involvement was alleged but never proved.

The Afghan War Escalates: Moving Toward Stingers

By 1984, the Afghan mujahideen — armed through the ISI with American and Saudi weapons — were imposing serious costs on the Soviet military. But Soviet helicopter gunships remained devastatingly effective in the rugged Afghan terrain, and American policymakers were debating whether to supply man-portable surface-to-air missiles (MANPADS) that could counter this Soviet air advantage.

Pakistan's ISI chief General Akhtar Abdur Rahman and CIA Director William Casey met repeatedly to plan the escalation of the war. The decision to supply FIM-92 Stinger anti-aircraft missiles — made in 1986 — was the culmination of a debate that had been running since 1984. Through this year, the ISI was receiving increasingly sophisticated anti-tank missiles, mortars, and communications equipment that were changing the tactical balance.

The mujahideen's ISI-assigned weapons allocation was skewed heavily toward the Islamist parties — Hekmatyar's Hizb-e-Islami received the largest allocations despite being among the least effective in combat. Zia and Akhtar's preference for Islamist commanders over tribal and nationalist ones reflected their vision of a post-Soviet Afghanistan as an Islamist state strategically aligned with Pakistan.

1985 Party-less Elections, the Eighth Amendment, and Martial Law Ends

Zia Creates Controlled Democracy and Entrenches His Power Constitutionally

The February 1985 Elections: Democracy Without Parties

In February 1985, Zia held elections to the National Assembly and four provincial assemblies — the first national elections since 1977. The elections were conducted on a non-party basis: candidates could not stand under party banners, parties could not officially campaign, and voters chose among individuals rather than political programmes. The MRD and all major opposition parties boycotted the elections, arguing that non-party elections were a farce.

Without party competition, the elections were dominated by 'electables' — the locally powerful figures who could win on the basis of personal patronage networks: landlords, tribal chiefs, industrial families, and biraderi (clan) leaders. The result was a National Assembly of generally conservative, propertied men whose primary loyalty was to their local patron networks rather than to any political programme or ideology.

Turnout was modest — particularly in Sindh, where the PPP boycott was most effective. In some constituencies, only a small fraction of eligible voters cast ballots. The legitimacy of the resulting assemblies was therefore limited: they were elected, but from a restricted pool of candidates, by a fraction of the electorate, in conditions that excluded organised political competition.

Muhammad Khan Junejo: The Nominal Prime Minister

Zia appointed Muhammad Khan Junejo — a mild-mannered Sindhi politician from the Pakistan Muslim League, known for his personal honesty and lack of strong factional ties — as Prime Minister in March 1985. The appointment was carefully calculated: Junejo was senior enough to be credible but not powerful enough to threaten Zia's supremacy.

Junejo proved more independently minded than Zia anticipated. He made genuine attempts to govern: launching an infrastructure programme (the 'Five Points' programme for roads, water, electricity, schools, and health centres), attempting to rationalise the civil service, and — most consequentially — showing a willingness to settle the Afghan war diplomatically rather than pursue it indefinitely. This last tendency would eventually cost him his job.

The relationship between Zia and Junejo was one of the defining political dynamics of the mid-1980s: a constitutional Prime Minister trying to exercise real authority, and a President-General who retained all ultimate power but wanted to maintain the facade of civilian governance. Zia eventually dismissed Junejo in May 1988, citing corruption and the Ojhri Camp disaster.

The Eighth Amendment: The Constitution Distorted

The most consequential legislative act of the Zia era — and one of the most consequential in Pakistan's constitutional history — was the passage of the Eighth Amendment to the 1973 Constitution in October 1985. The National Assembly, dominated by electables with no strong party loyalties and subject to government pressure, passed the amendment with minimal resistance.

The Eighth Amendment had three principal effects. First, it retrospectively validated all of Zia's martial law actions, presidential orders, and ordinances — giving constitutional legitimacy to eight years of extra-constitutional rule. Second, it incorporated Zia's Islamisation ordinances into the

constitution, making them harder to repeal. Third and most significantly, it inserted Article 58(2)(b) into the constitution, giving the President the power to dissolve the National Assembly 'in his discretion' if he concluded that the parliamentary government could not be carried on in accordance with the constitution.

Article 58(2)(b) fundamentally altered Pakistan's parliamentary system. In a genuine parliamentary democracy, the Prime Minister is accountable to parliament and is secure as long as he or she commands a parliamentary majority. Under the Eighth Amendment, the Prime Minister also needed to retain the President's confidence — effectively transforming Pakistan's parliamentary system into a semi-presidential one, with the President as the dominant executive.

Between 1988 and 1996, Article 58(2)(b) was used four times to dismiss elected governments: Benazir Bhutto's first government (1990), Nawaz Sharif's first government (1993), Benazir Bhutto's second government (1996), and Nawaz Sharif's second government would have faced it had the Supreme Court not blocked its use. The Eighth Amendment remained in the constitution until the Seventeenth Amendment of 2003 modified it.

"The Eighth Amendment is the rope around the neck of every Prime Minister. It means no elected government can govern; every government rules only on sufferance of the President."

— Benazir Bhutto, addressing the PPP Central Executive Committee, 1988

Lifting of Martial Law: 30 December 1985

On 30 December 1985, Zia formally lifted martial law — eight and a half years after its imposition on 5 July 1977. Political parties were once again permitted to function. The formal legal state of martial law ended. Pakistan now had a civilian Prime Minister, an elected National Assembly, provincial governments, and a functioning higher judiciary.

Yet the lifting of martial law did not restore democracy in any meaningful sense. Zia remained President with the power to dismiss the government under Article 58(2)(b). The Hudood Ordinances, blasphemy laws, and other Islamisation measures were now constitutionally entrenched. The military's political influence was institutionalised rather than constrained. The intelligence services retained their penetration of political life.

The crucial distinction that many observers failed to draw was between the form of democracy — elected assemblies, civilian Prime Minister, open political competition — and its substance: a genuine transfer of power from military to civilian authority. What Pakistan had in December 1985 was the form without the substance — a civilian facade maintained by a system designed to ensure that civilian governments could not challenge military prerogatives.

The Afghan War in 1985: Gorbachev Takes Over

Mikhail Gorbachev became General Secretary of the Soviet Communist Party in March 1985 and immediately began a strategic review of the Afghan war. Unlike his predecessors, Gorbachev was willing to acknowledge that the war was unwinnable at sustainable cost and began exploring exit strategies. His famous description of Afghanistan as 'a bleeding wound' captured the Soviet military's growing frustration.

Pakistan's ISI and the CIA intensified the supply of weapons to the mujahideen through 1985, anticipating that increased pressure might accelerate a Soviet withdrawal. Total American and Saudi funding for the mujahideen reached approximately $1 billion annually by 1985. The variety and sophistication of weapons being supplied increased significantly.

Three million Afghan refugees were now settled in Pakistan — the largest refugee population in the world. The costs of hosting this population — environmental degradation, social disruption, weapons proliferation, drugs — were being borne almost entirely by Pakistan's frontier provinces. The federal government received international aid to offset these costs, but the distribution was unequal and the social transformation of the affected areas permanent.

Pakistan in 1985: Statistical Snapshot

Population: approx. 96 million | President: General Zia ul-Haq | Prime Minister: Muhammad Khan Junejo (from March 1985) | Afghan refugees: ~3 million | Martial law: lifted 30 December 1985 (imposed 5 July 1977) | Eighth Amendment: October 1985 | GDP growth: ~6-7% annually | Remittances from Gulf: ~$3 billion annually | Madrassas in Pakistan: est. 8,000–10,000 (up from ~900 in 1947)

Pakistan's Nuclear Journey 1973–1985: From Multan to the Threshold

How Pakistan Acquired the Capacity to Build the Islamic Bomb

The Strategic Imperative: Why Pakistan Chose the Bomb

Pakistan's decision to pursue nuclear weapons capability was rooted in the existential insecurity generated by its three wars with India and culminating in the catastrophe of 1971. Indian nuclear tests in 1974 confirmed what Pakistani strategists feared: India was determined to maintain overwhelming conventional and potential nuclear superiority. No amount of conventional military modernisation — even with American F-16s — could offset India's size and resource advantages.

Pakistan's nuclear programme was therefore not a luxury or a prestige project: it was calculated as the only available equaliser in an asymmetric strategic environment. The argument that two nuclear-armed South Asian states would be more stable than one — the logic of mutual deterrence that had prevailed in the Cold War — was persuasive to Pakistani planners, even if it horrified Western non-proliferation advocates.

A.Q. Khan: Scientist, Patriot, and Proliferator

Abdul Qadeer Khan's role in Pakistan's nuclear programme was decisive. Born in Bhopal, India, in 1936 and educated in metallurgy in Europe, Khan had worked at the URENCO uranium enrichment facility in Almelo, Netherlands, where he had access to classified centrifuge designs. His offer to Bhutto in 1974 was simple and powerful: he could deliver the enrichment technology Pakistan needed.

Khan established the Engineering Research Laboratories at Kahuta — later renamed Khan Research Laboratories (KRL) — and worked with extraordinary energy and patriotic commitment. His procurement network across Europe and North America — using front companies, brokers, and willing suppliers — acquired the components that Pakistan could not manufacture domestically. Dutch, German, Swiss, and British companies supplied parts; in some cases their governments were aware and chose to look away.

Khan was a brilliant organiser and motivator who built Kahuta into a sophisticated scientific institution. He was also intensely nationalistic, attributing Pakistan's vulnerability to Western double standards that accepted India's nuclear programme while denying Pakistan the same right. This combination of patriotism and grievance would later lead him to transfer nuclear weapons technology to Libya, Iran, and North Korea — in what became the most dangerous proliferation network in history.

International Pressure and Pakistan's Response

The international community's attempts to halt Pakistan's nuclear programme illustrate the limitations of non-proliferation diplomacy when states regard nuclear weapons as existential necessities. The Symington and Glenn Amendments to US foreign assistance legislation required the cut-off of aid to countries pursuing nuclear enrichment without international safeguards.

American administrations — Carter, Reagan — were caught between the legal requirement to act on proliferation evidence and the strategic necessity of maintaining Pakistan as an ally. The solution was the annual presidential 'certification' that Pakistan did not possess a nuclear explosive

device — a certification that became increasingly fictional as Kahuta's progress was well documented by American intelligence.

Pakistan's public position was consistent denial: it was pursuing a peaceful nuclear programme for energy purposes and had no intention of building weapons. This position was maintained even as Kahuta was producing weapons-grade enriched uranium. The gap between Pakistan's public position and its actual programme was an open secret in Washington, but the Afghan war made it an inconvenient truth.

Pakistan and the Cold War: Strategic Alignments 1973–1985

How a Small South Asian State Navigated Superpower Competition

Pakistan Between the Superpowers

Pakistan's Cold War position was uniquely complex. It was a formal American ally through SEATO and CENTO, recipient of substantial American military aid, and a country whose military establishment was deeply suspicious of the Soviet Union and India (which had a Treaty of Peace, Friendship, and Cooperation with the USSR signed in 1971). Yet Pakistan also had the China relationship — a close strategic partnership with a state that was itself at times hostile to both superpowers.

Bhutto's foreign policy had attempted to balance these alignments more actively, seeking Islamic solidarity, closer ties with China, and a degree of non-alignment. His hosting of the 1974 Islamic Summit was part of this strategy. But the fundamental strategic logic — that Pakistan needed American weapons and economic support to balance India, and Chinese backing to deter Soviet pressure — constrained how far any Pakistani government could deviate from the Western alignment.

The Saudi Connection: Religion, Money, and Strategy

Pakistan's relationship with Saudi Arabia deepened dramatically through the Bhutto and Zia years and became one of the defining features of Pakistan's external orientation. Saudi Arabia was Pakistan's primary source of Islamic solidarity, financial support, oil at preferential rates, and — through the Afghan jihad — a strategic partner in anti-Soviet operations.

Pakistani military personnel served in Saudi Arabia on secondment, providing training and expertise to Saudi forces. Pakistani nuclear scientists — in a relationship that was never formally acknowledged — were reportedly involved in consultations with Saudi officials about Saudi Arabia's own security options. The hypothesis that Saudi Arabia provided financial support for Pakistan's nuclear programme in exchange for a potential option on Pakistani nuclear weapons — 'the Islamic bomb' — has been widely discussed but never officially confirmed.

Saudi funding for Pakistani religious institutions — madrassas, mosques, Islamic publishing houses — transformed the religious landscape of Pakistan in ways that served Saudi soft power interests by spreading Wahhabi theological perspectives. The transformation was rarely discussed openly in Pakistani public discourse, but its effects were evident in the changing character of Pakistani Islam.

Pakistan-India Relations 1973–1985: Cold Peace and Occasional Crisis

Relations between Pakistan and India through this period were characterised by formal peace — there was no armed conflict — but deep mutual suspicion, competitive strategic manoeuvring, and ongoing tensions over Kashmir. The Simla Agreement of 1972 had established a framework for bilateral relations, including the conversion of the Kashmir ceasefire line into the Line of Control (LoC). Both countries exchanged ambassadors and maintained minimal diplomatic contact.

India's growing economic and military strength through the 1970s and 1980s — including the 1974 nuclear test and the steady modernisation of its conventional forces — was a constant source of Pakistani anxiety. Pakistan's response — the nuclear programme, the American alliance, the China

relationship — was driven fundamentally by the perceived need to offset Indian advantages.

The Siachen glacier conflict, which began in 1984 when India occupied the Siachen glacier in the disputed Karakoram region before Pakistan could do so, added a new military flashpoint to the India-Pakistan relationship. Soldiers from both armies would die in one of the highest and coldest battlefields in the world for decades — a conflict largely without strategic purpose but with enormous human cost.

Pakistan in 1985: A Statistical Snapshot — Detailed

Where Pakistan Stood at the End of Zia's Martial Law Period

Population and Demographics

Pakistan's population in 1985 was approximately 96 million, having grown from roughly 65 million at the time of the 1971 separation (when East Pakistan became Bangladesh). The population growth rate was one of the highest in the world — approximately 3% annually — driven by high fertility rates, declining infant mortality, and improving life expectancy. At this rate, Pakistan's population would double in approximately 23 years.

The population was overwhelmingly young: approximately 45% under the age of 15. This demographic structure had profound implications for education, employment, and political mobilisation — Pakistan needed to create millions of new jobs annually merely to absorb new labour market entrants, a challenge that successive governments would struggle to meet.

Urbanisation was accelerating. Karachi had grown to approximately 7–8 million people, making it one of the largest cities in Asia. Lahore had over 4 million. Faisalabad, Rawalpindi, and Multan were all growing rapidly. The urban proportion of Pakistan's population had risen from roughly 22% at independence to over 30% by 1985.

Education and Literacy

Pakistan's literacy rate in 1985 was estimated at approximately 26%— a significant improvement from the roughly 14% at independence but still among the lower rates in Asia. The gender gap was stark: male literacy was approximately 35%, female literacy approximately 16%. In rural areas and in Balochistan, female literacy was in single digits.

Primary school enrolment had expanded significantly, but quality remained poor: high dropout rates, poorly trained and irregularly paid teachers, inadequate facilities, and rote learning methods that emphasised memorisation over comprehension. The parallel expansion of madrassa education — outside the state system and providing a narrow religious curriculum — was absorbing a growing share of Pakistani children, particularly boys from poor families.

Higher education had expanded: Pakistan had over 20 universities in 1985, compared with just a handful at independence. But the quality was uneven and the political atmosphere — with student unions banned and IJT controlling campuses — was not conducive to intellectual development.

Economy: Growth, Aid Dependence, and Structural Weakness

Pakistan's GDP in 1985 was approximately $35 billion (current prices), representing growth from around $10 billion in 1973. Per capita income had approximately doubled in real terms since independence, but from a very low base and with great inequality of distribution. Pakistan remained a lower-middle-income country by international standards.

The economy's dependence on external transfers — American and Saudi aid, workers' remittances, and IMF structural adjustment programmes — was a fundamental vulnerability. When aid flows declined (as they eventually would after the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan), Pakistan's fiscal and balance-of-payments position deteriorated sharply.

Agriculture remained the largest sector, employing approximately 50% of the workforce. The manufacturing sector, while growing, was heavily focused on textiles and was not diversifying into higher value-added industries. The services sector was expanding but much of it was in the informal economy. Pakistan's export basket remained narrow and undiversified — cotton, yarn, and cloth dominated, leaving the economy highly vulnerable to cotton price cycles.

Military and Strategic Position

Pakistan's military in 1985 was significantly stronger than it had been in 1973. The army had approximately 500,000 personnel, equipped with modern American weapons including M48 and M60 tanks, and was training with American advisers. The Air Force operated F-16s and Mirage aircraft. The Navy was modest but improving.

The nuclear programme at Kahuta was widely believed — based on American intelligence assessments — to have achieved or be near the threshold of weapons capability. Pakistan had the enrichment capacity and the weapons design knowledge to produce a device if a political decision were made. Whether Zia had made such a decision, or was deliberately keeping Pakistan just below the threshold that would trigger American sanctions, was a subject of considerable analytical debate.

Pakistan's strategic situation was simultaneously strong and precarious: strong because of the American alliance, the nuclear programme, the China relationship, and the Afghan war's enhancement of its strategic importance; precarious because of the dependence on external support, the Afghan war's long-term social consequences, and the structural weakness of an economy that could not sustain its military ambitions without continued foreign assistance.

Pakistan's Cultural and Intellectual Life Under Zia

Literature, Arts, and Thought in the Age of Censorship and Repression

Urdu Literature: Resistance Through Art

Pakistan's Urdu literary tradition maintained its vitality through the Zia years, often finding ways to express political dissent through allegory, metaphor, and the classical poetic tradition. The ghazal, with its centuries-old conventions of the oppressive beloved and the suffering lover, became a vehicle for political commentary that censors found difficult to act on without appearing absurd.

Faiz Ahmed Faiz, the great progressive poet who had been imprisoned in the Rawalpindi Conspiracy case of 1951 and had spent periods in exile, returned to Pakistan in 1982 and died in Lahore in 1984. His poetry combining classical Urdu ghazal forms with political content was loved across Pakistan's political spectrum. His funeral in Lahore drew enormous crowds that were simultaneously a literary tribute and a political demonstration.

The progressive literary tradition associated with writers like Habib Jalib, Ahmed Faraz, and Kishwar Naheed continued to produce work critical of the regime. Habib Jalib's defiant poetry, with its direct confrontation of power, made him a beloved figure among students and workers. Ahmed Faraz went into voluntary exile in protest against censorship. Kishwar Naheed's feminist poetry challenged both the regime's gender politics and traditional Pakistani society's conservatism.

Pakistani Television Drama: Art Within Constraints

Pakistan Television Corporation (PTV) drama of the 1980s was, paradoxically, among the finest in the medium's history — and this despite the strict moral and political constraints under which it operated. Writers like Haseena Moin, Ashfaq Ahmed, and Bano Qudsia found ways to address social issues — domestic violence, class inequality, women's aspirations, corruption — within the limits of what censors would permit.

Serials like 'Ankahi', 'Dhoop Kinare', 'Tanhaiyan', and 'Waris' achieved enormous popularity and are still remembered as benchmarks of Pakistani television drama. They depicted an urbane, educated, and socially aware Pakistan that coexisted uneasily with the official religious conservatism being promoted by Zia's Islamisation programme.

The contrast between PTV's sophisticated urban drama and the religious programming that occupied increasing airtime was a microcosm of Pakistan's broader cultural schizophrenia: a modernising, educated, professional class with liberal values coexisting with an increasingly assertive religious conservatism that was backed by state power.

Cricket: National Pride in Dark Times

Pakistan cricket provided one of the few unambiguous sources of national pride through the Zia years. The Pakistan cricket team underwent a dramatic transformation through the 1970s and 1980s, developing into one of the most formidable teams in world cricket. Imran Khan's emergence as one of the finest all-rounders in cricket history, combined with the batting genius of Javed Miandad and Zaheer Abbas and the bowling of Sarfraz Nawaz and the young Wasim Akram (who debuted in 1984), created a golden generation.

Victories over England, the West Indies, and India provided moments of national celebration that transcended political divisions. In a country where almost every public institution had been damaged or distorted, the cricket ground remained a space of genuine meritocracy and national achievement. The scale of public engagement with cricket — listened to on transistor radios across the country, celebrated in streets and bazaars — spoke to a deep Pakistani need for collective pride that the political system was failing to provide.

The Brain Drain: Intellectual Emigration and the Diaspora

The Zia years accelerated a brain drain that had begun in the Bhutto era. Pakistani professionals — doctors, engineers, scientists, academics, lawyers, and businesspeople — emigrated in large numbers, primarily to the United States, United Kingdom, Canada, and the Gulf states. The combination of poor professional opportunities at home, political repression, and the demoralising atmosphere of Islamisation drove many of Pakistan's best-educated people to seek futures elsewhere.

The Pakistani diaspora in the United States and United Kingdom grew substantially through the 1980s — both as a source of remittances and as a political constituency with influence in Western capitals. Pakistani-Americans and Pakistani-British citizens lobbied for democratic governance and against Zia's human rights abuses. Benazir Bhutto courted these communities extensively from her London base, building the international networks that would facilitate her political return.

The loss of educated Pakistanis to emigration was a substantial setback for long-term development. Each doctor or engineer who emigrated represented years of educational investment that benefited another country. The Pakistani state showed little interest in creating the conditions — professional opportunity, intellectual freedom, rule of law — that might have retained this human capital. This failure to build an environment in which talented Pakistanis could flourish at home became one of the most persistent structural weaknesses of the Pakistani state.

Women in Pakistan 1973–1985: Between Progress and Regression

The status of women in Pakistan through these years presents a complex picture of simultaneous progress and regression. On the side of progress: increasing numbers of women entered the formal workforce, particularly in urban areas; women's university enrollment grew; and individual women achieved prominent positions in medicine, law, the civil service, and journalism. Benazir Bhutto's political emergence was the most visible symbol of women's capacity for public leadership.

Against this backdrop of individual achievement, Zia's legal Islamisation imposed structural discrimination on women as a class. The Hudood Ordinances, the Law of Evidence, and the atmosphere of conservative religiosity created legal and social conditions that made women more vulnerable to domestic violence, denied them equal standing in court, and subjected rape victims to the risk of criminal prosecution. Rural women, already marginalised by illiteracy and patriarchal social structures, suffered most.

The Women's Action Forum and other women's organisations mounted courageous resistance. Their demands were straightforward: equal citizenship, protection from violence, access to justice, and freedom from state-imposed religious discrimination. These demands were not met in the Zia years, but the organisations that articulated them built the institutional foundation for women's rights advocacy that would be active for decades.

Sindh, Punjab, NWFP, Balochistan: The Four Provinces in the Zia Era

Punjab: The Dominant Province

Punjab — home to approximately 60% of Pakistan's population and the primary recruitment base of the Pakistan Army — was in many ways the beneficiary of the Zia era's political arrangements. The military's Punjabi character meant that Punjab's interests were better represented in the distribution of state resources, military contracts, and development expenditure.

Punjab's agricultural economy continued to grow strongly through the Green Revolution, with wheat and cotton yields improving significantly. The province's industrial base — concentrated in Lahore, Faisalabad, Sialkot, Gujranwala, and Multan — expanded as American aid and domestic investment flowed in. Lahore, always Pakistan's cultural capital, maintained its literary and artistic traditions even under the constraints of Zia's censorship.

Punjab was not untouched by the Zia era's darker aspects: the heroin epidemic struck Punjab cities as well as the frontier; sectarian violence between Shia and Sunni groups in Jhang district began its deadly escalation; and the political repression of the MRD affected Punjabi politicians and activists. But Punjab was spared the insurgency, military operations, and systematic marginalisation that marked the Zia experience in Balochistan and Sindh.

Sindh: Marginalisation, Resistance, and Ethnic Tension

Sindh under Zia experienced both political marginalisation and growing ethnic tension. As the PPP's heartland and Bhutto's native province, Sindh was treated by the Zia regime with consistent suspicion. The MRD uprising of 1983 was most intense in Sindh's interior, and the subsequent military crackdown left deep scars.

Karachi — Pakistan's largest city and commercial capital — was experiencing rapid demographic transformation through the 1970s and 1980s. The muhajir community (Urdu-speaking migrants from India who had settled in Karachi and other Sindhi cities at Partition) was growing increasingly assertive of its own political identity, distinct from both the PPP-supporting Sindhis and the Punjabi-dominated military. The Muhajir Qaumi Movement (MQM), founded in 1984 by Altaf Hussain, gave organised political expression to muhajir identity. Its emergence would dramatically reshape Sindhi politics in the years ahead.

The influx of Afghan refugees into Karachi — the city attracted Afghans as well as Pashtuns from NWFP — added another ethnic dimension to Karachi's volatile mix. By the mid-1980s, Karachi was a city of extraordinary economic dynamism and extraordinary social tension, with multiple ethnic communities competing for resources, jobs, and political influence in conditions of inadequate housing, infrastructure, and governance.

NWFP and Balochistan: The Frontier Provinces Transformed

The North-West Frontier Province bore the greatest direct burden of the Afghan war. Three million Afghan refugees — concentrated in camps and settlements across the province — transformed its demographics, economy, and social fabric. The arms and drugs trade accompanying the jihad infrastructure enriched some and destroyed others. Traditional Pashtun tribal structures were both supported (as ISI used tribal networks for mujahideen organisation) and disrupted (as refugee influx and armed conflict altered traditional power arrangements).

Peshawar became a city of extraordinary geopolitical significance: the base of seven Afghan mujahideen parties, home to CIA and ISI operations, destination for Western journalists and aid

workers, and crossroads of the weapons and drugs trades. Afghan intellectuals, poets, and politicians in exile added to the city's cosmopolitan character even as its traditional social fabric was under enormous pressure.

Balochistan, still nursing the wounds of the 1973–77 insurgency, remained the most underdeveloped and politically alienated province. Despite its vast natural gas reserves — which supplied the whole of Pakistan — the province received the smallest share of development expenditure. Literacy rates, infant mortality, access to clean water and health care: on every social indicator, Balochistan ranked last. The sense of exploitation, of a province whose resources were drained for others' benefit while its own population lived in poverty, was deeply embedded in Baloch political consciousness.

International Human Rights and Pakistan's Diplomatic Isolation

Zia's Pakistan faced persistent international criticism for its human rights record — the execution of Bhutto, the Hudood Ordinances, flogging sentences, the imprisonment of political activists, and the suppression of press freedom all attracted condemnation from Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, the International Commission of Jurists, and Western governments. The UN Human Rights Commission passed resolutions critical of Pakistan's record.

This international pressure had limited practical effect, primarily because of Pakistan's strategic importance to the United States in the Afghan war. Western governments that might otherwise have applied meaningful pressure on Pakistan's human rights record chose instead to maintain close relations with the Zia regime. The Reagan administration's 'constructive engagement' approach, which prioritised strategic partnership over human rights concerns, gave Zia significant insulation from Western criticism.

The contradiction was stark and was noted by Pakistan's opposition: the United States, which proclaimed democracy as a universal value, was supporting and arming a military dictatorship that had hanged a democratically elected Prime Minister, imprisoned his daughter, flogged its citizens, and systematically violated the rights of women and religious minorities. Cold War realpolitik trumped democratic principle, as it had so often in American foreign policy history.

Conclusion: 1973–1985 — Constitution, Coup, and Transformation

The thirteen years covered in this volume represent the most consequential period of institutional transformation in Pakistan since its founding. They began with the finest moment in Pakistan's constitutional history — the unanimous adoption of the 1973 Constitution — and ended with that constitution gutted by the Eighth Amendment, its author executed, and a military dictator ruling behind a carefully constructed civilian facade.

Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's legacy is irreducibly complex. He gave Pakistan its best constitution, its nuclear programme, its first genuine attempt at redistributive economic policy, and a sense of mass democratic participation that his predecessors had never attempted. He also gave it the FSF, the rigged election of 1977, the brutal suppression of Balochistan, and the political culture of personal rule that normalised the very authoritarianism he had once opposed. His execution remains one of the most contested acts in Pakistani judicial history.

Zia ul-Haq's legacy is darker still. His Islamisation programme transformed Pakistan's legal system and educational culture in ways that deepened discrimination against women, religious minorities, and the Ahmadiyya community. The Hudood Ordinances, blasphemy laws, and Qanoon-e-Shahadat created a legal framework of institutionalised inequality that would take decades to partially dismantle. His decision to join the Afghan jihad brought weapons, drugs, and millions of refugees into Pakistan with consequences that continue to this day.

Yet this period also contained genuine achievements: the 1973 Constitution itself was a real compact; Pakistan's nuclear programme — whatever one thinks of nuclear weapons — gave the country a strategic deterrent that fundamentally altered its security calculus; and the courage of civil society — lawyers, women activists, journalists, doctors, students, and political workers who resisted Zia's authoritarianism at personal cost — represented the best of Pakistan's democratic spirit.

As Pakistan entered 1986, Zia's controlled democracy was in place, the Afghan war was approaching its climax, and Benazir Bhutto was preparing to return from exile. The decade ahead would bring democratic elections, the birth of nuclear Pakistan, the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan, and the beginning of yet another cycle of civilian-military competition that would define Pakistani politics into the twenty-first century.

Appendix: Key Events Timeline 1973–1985

Date	Event
10 Apr 1973	1973 Constitution unanimously adopted by National Assembly
14 Aug 1973	1973 Constitution promulgated — Pakistan's 26th Independence Day
Feb 1973	Bhutto dismisses NAP government in Balochistan; insurgency erupts
1973–77	Balochistan insurgency — army and Iranian forces deployed
Jan 1974	Second Islamic Summit Conference, Lahore — 37 Muslim states attend
Feb 1974	Pakistan formally recognises Bangladesh
18 May 1974	India conducts Pokhran nuclear test ('Smiling Buddha')
Sep 1974	Second Constitutional Amendment — Ahmadis declared non-Muslim
1974	A.Q. Khan's offer accepted; Kahuta uranium enrichment programme launched
1974–76	Bhutto nationalisations: banks, insurance, agro-industries
1975	Federal Security Force atrocities peak; opposition repressed
Feb 1975	National Awami Party banned; Hyderabad Conspiracy Case begins
Mar 1976	Bhutto appoints Zia ul-Haq as Army Chief of Staff
Jan 1977	Pakistan National Alliance (PNA) formed by 9 opposition parties
7 Mar 1977	General elections — PPP wins 155 seats; PNA alleges rigging
Mar–Jun 1977	PNA mass agitation; Nizam-e-Mustafa movement; hundreds killed
5 Jul 1977	General Zia ul-Haq's coup — Operation Fair Play; constitution suspended
Sep 1977	Bhutto re-arrested on murder charge; trial begins in Lahore
Sep 1978	Zia assumes office of President of Pakistan
Feb 1979	Hudood Ordinances promulgated — Islamic punishments introduced
Feb 1979	Iranian Revolution — Khomeini establishes Islamic Republic
Feb 1979	Supreme Court (4-3) upholds death sentence on Bhutto
4 Apr 1979	Zulfikar Ali Bhutto hanged at Rawalpindi Central Jail
27 Dec 1979	Soviet Union invades Afghanistan — Pakistan becomes frontline state
1980	Federal Shariat Court established with power to invalidate laws
1980	Afghan refugee crisis — over 1 million refugees in Pakistan
1980	CIA Operation Cyclone — ISI becomes conduit for mujahideen weapons
Feb 1981	Movement for Restoration of Democracy (MRD) founded
Mar 1981	PIA hijacking by Al-Zulfikar; 13 days; Pakistani cadet killed
1981	Women's Action Forum (WAF) founded to resist discriminatory laws
1981	US $3.2 billion, 6-year aid package; 40 F-16s for Pakistan
1982	Section 295-B — blasphemy (Quran) — life imprisonment

Date	Event
1982	Qanoon-e-Shahadat — Islamic evidence law disadvantages women
Aug 1983	MRD Sindh uprising — most serious challenge to Zia; brutally suppressed
Jan 1984	Benazir Bhutto leaves Pakistan for exile in London
Apr 1984	Ordinance XX — Ahmadis criminalised for practising their faith
Jul 1984	Shahnawaz Bhutto dies in France in mysterious circumstances
Dec 1984	Rigged referendum — Zia claims 97.7% approval; opposition boycotts
Feb 1985	Party-less National Assembly elections; MRD boycotts
Mar 1985	Muhammad Khan Junejo appointed Prime Minister
Mar 1985	Gorbachev becomes Soviet General Secretary; begins rethinking Afghanistan
Oct 1985	Eighth Amendment — Article 58(2)(b) gives President power to dismiss PM
30 Dec 1985	Martial law formally lifted after 8 years 178 days

Appendix: Heads of State & Government 1973–1985

Name	Role	Period
Zulfikar Ali Bhutto	President then Prime Minister	Aug 1973 – Jul 1977
Fazal Elahi Chaudhry	President (ceremonial, 1973 constitution)	Aug 1973 – Sep 1978
Gen. Muhammad Zia ul-Haq	Chief Martial Law Administrator	5 Jul 1977 – onwards
Gen. Muhammad Zia ul-Haq	President of Pakistan	Sep 1978 – Aug 1988
Muhammad Khan Junejo	Prime Minister	Mar 1985 – May 1988

■ Pakistan Zindabad ■

Long Live Pakistan

HISTORY OF PAKISTAN

A Comprehensive Year-by-Year Account

1985 – 1995

From Zia's Controlled Democracy to Benazir, Nawaz, and the Decade of Musical Chairs

Covering: Politics • Governance • Economy • Military • Society • Foreign Relations

Volume IV of the Pakistan History Series. Continues directly from the 1947–1985 volume. Page numbering is preserved across all volumes.

Foreword: The Decade of Democratic Hopes and Betrayals

The decade from 1985 to 1995 is one of the most turbulent, consequential, and ultimately disillusioning in Pakistan's political history. It began with Zia ul-Haq's controlled democracy — martial law lifted but the Eighth Amendment firmly in place — and ended with the Supreme Court dismissing Benazir Bhutto's second government and Pakistan mired in debt, sectarian violence, and institutional decay.

Between these bookends lay events of extraordinary significance: Zia's death in a mysterious air crash in August 1988; Pakistan's first free and fair election in November 1988; the extraordinary spectacle of Benazir Bhutto — daughter of the man Zia had hanged — becoming Prime Minister; the nuclear tests that never officially happened but everyone knew about; the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War that had defined Pakistan's strategic position; and the first Gulf War that demonstrated Pakistani military capabilities on the international stage.

Yet the decade's defining feature was the exhausting cycle of civilian governments dismissed and remade — what Pakistanis came to call the 'decade of musical chairs.' Between 1988 and 1999, no civilian government completed its full term. Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif alternated in power, each dismissing the other's government through the very Article 58(2)(b) that Zia had inserted into the constitution. The military remained the arbiter of Pakistani politics, never directly governing but never fully relinquishing control.

This volume covers those ten years in the depth they deserve — the political dramas, the economic reforms and failures, the social changes, the foreign policy pivots, and the enduring structural problems that no government found the will or capacity to address.

1986 Benazir Returns; Zia Faces His First Real Challenge

The PPP Leader's Homecoming Electrifies Pakistan

Benazir Bhutto Returns: 10 April 1986

On 10 April 1986, Benazir Bhutto returned to Pakistan from two years of self-imposed exile in London, landing at Lahore's Allama Iqbal Airport to one of the largest public gatherings in Pakistan's history. Estimates of the crowd that came to receive her ranged from one to two million people — a staggering demonstration of the PPP's organisational strength and Benazir's personal magnetism. The scenes in Lahore and subsequently in Karachi were reminiscent of Bhutto himself at his political peak.

Benazir's return was a calculated political act, timed to demonstrate that she could not be kept in exile indefinitely and that the PPP's popular base was intact despite years of repression. She had spent her exile building an international profile — addressing Western parliaments and human rights organisations, writing her memoir 'Daughter of the East', and maintaining the PPP's international connections — and now converted that profile into domestic political capital.

Her political programme was straightforward: restoration of full democracy, repeal of the Eighth Amendment, reversal of the Hudood Ordinances, and economic reforms to address the inequalities of the Zia era. These demands were constituted the MRD platform that the PPP had been advocating since 1981, but Benazir articulated them with a clarity, energy, and personal authority that had been absent from opposition politics.

Zia's response to Benazir's return was to permit it — calculating that arresting her again would generate international outrage and domestic martyrdom — while using every instrument of the state to constrain her political activities. Rallies were banned in sensitive areas, activists were harassed, and intelligence services monitored her movements. But the political momentum Benazir had generated could not be easily suppressed.

Junejo's Growing Independence and Zia's Discomfort

Through 1986, Prime Minister Muhammad Khan Junejo was showing more independence than Zia had anticipated when he appointed him. Junejo launched a Five-Point Programme for rural development — roads, schools, health centres, clean water, and electricity for villages — that enjoyed genuine public support. He also began asserting the civilian government's authority in matters that Zia considered his exclusive domain.

Most significantly, Junejo showed interest in a diplomatic settlement of the Afghan war — opening contacts with Afghan government representatives and signalling willingness to engage with the Geneva Accords negotiations. This alarmed Zia and the ISI, who wanted to continue the jihad until a mujahideen government replaced the communist administration in Kabul. The tension between Zia and Junejo over Afghanistan policy would eventually contribute to Junejo's dismissal.

Political parties were officially permitted to function again after the lifting of martial law, and elections were announced for the following year. Benazir's PPP began organising openly, holding rallies and registering members across the country. The Muslim League — now dominated by Nawaz Sharif in Punjab — was also building its organisation. For the first time since 1977, Pakistan appeared to be on a genuine trajectory toward competitive democracy.

The Geneva Accords Process Begins

International negotiations on Afghanistan gathered pace through 1986. The United Nations mediated talks between Pakistan and Afghanistan (the Soviet Union and the United States were involved as guarantors) in Geneva, working toward an agreement on Soviet troop withdrawal. Pakistan's position — negotiated by Foreign Minister Sahabzada Yaqub Khan — sought a Soviet withdrawal, the right of Afghan refugees to return, and an end to interference in Afghanistan's internal affairs.

The introduction of Stinger anti-aircraft missiles to the Afghan mujahideen in 1986 — supplied through the ISI with American authorisation — transformed the military balance in Afghanistan. The Stingers gave the mujahideen the ability to shoot down Soviet helicopter gunships and even fixed-wing aircraft, negating one of the Soviet military's key tactical advantages. Soviet casualty rates increased significantly, strengthening Gorbachev's conviction that the war needed to end.

Political Parties Reconstitute: PML-N Rises in Punjab

The post-martial law political landscape saw the emergence of Nawaz Sharif as the dominant political figure in Punjab. Nawaz had served as Chief Minister of Punjab under Zia's non-party system and had built a powerful patronage network across the province's business class, industrial families, and biraderi (clan) networks. The 'Sharif brand' was associated with infrastructure development — roads, bridges, and the Lahore Ring Road — that was visible and popular.

The Pakistan Muslim League (PML) was the natural home for politicians who had worked within the Zia system but wanted to continue under a civilian framework. Nawaz Sharif transformed this coalition into an effective vote-winning machine in Punjab, leveraging government resources as Chief Minister to build a political base that would challenge the PPP nationally.

The contrast between Benazir and Nawaz illustrated the geographic and class divisions in Pakistani politics: Benazir's PPP was strongest in Sindh, among the rural poor, workers, and those with emotional connections to Bhutto's legacy. Nawaz's PML was strongest in Punjab, among the urban middle class, businessmen, and those who had prospered during the Zia era.

Afghan Policy Under Benazir: Continuity with Restraint

Benazir Bhutto inherited a contradictory Afghan policy. She was personally and politically committed to democracy and had been a victim of the same Islamist forces that the ISI was supporting in Afghanistan. Yet she was unable to fundamentally change the Afghan policy that the ISI and army had developed over a decade.

Benazir's approach to Afghanistan was one of managed continuity — maintaining the ISI's support for the mujahideen while seeking a political settlement that would allow the Afghan refugees to return home. She made overtures to various Afghan factions and supported the Geneva Accords process. But the fundamental decisions on which Afghan groups to support and how much remained with the ISI, operating with a degree of autonomy that no civilian Prime Minister had been able to overcome.

1987 The Ojhri Disaster, Nuclear Advances, and Benazir's Marriage

A Year of Strategic Risks and Personal Milestones

Pakistan's Nuclear Programme: Approaching Declared Capability

By 1987, Pakistan's nuclear programme at Kahuta had achieved a level of capability that A.Q. Khan publicly acknowledged in a newspaper interview with Indian journalist Kuldip Nayar — one of the most remarkable episodes in the history of nuclear proliferation. Khan told Nayar that Pakistan had achieved a nuclear weapons capability, stating words to the effect that Pakistan could 'hurt India' with its nuclear arsenal.

The interview caused a sensation. The Pakistani government — maintaining its official position of 'peaceful nuclear programme' — distanced itself from Khan's comments. Khan himself claimed his words had been misrepresented. But the signal was clear and was read clearly in Washington, New Delhi, and world capitals: Pakistan had crossed the nuclear threshold, or was so close to it as to make no practical difference.

The American response was the annual presidential certification to Congress that Pakistan did not possess a nuclear explosive device — a certification that became harder to sustain with each passing year but that the Reagan administration continued to provide because cutting off aid to Pakistan during the final stages of the Afghan war was unthinkable. The Pressler Amendment of 1985, which required the President to certify annually that Pakistan did not possess a nuclear explosive device as a condition for continued American aid, was the legal framework within which this fiction was maintained.

Benazir Bhutto's Marriage to Asif Ali Zardari

In December 1987, Benazir Bhutto married Asif Ali Zardari — an arranged marriage negotiated by her mother Nusrat Bhutto. The marriage was a surprise to many political observers: Zardari was a businessman from a Sindhi family with no significant political credentials or public profile. Benazir, who had spent years positioning herself as a modern, educated woman challenging patriarchal structures, accepted a marriage arranged largely on the basis of family considerations — reflecting the persistent importance of clan and family networks even in elite Pakistani politics.

The marriage had significant political consequences. Zardari proved to be a political liability of the first order, attracting persistent allegations of corruption and earning the nickname 'Mr Ten Percent' — a reference to the commission he allegedly extracted from government contracts during Benazir's tenures as Prime Minister. His business dealings and political interference became one of the central arguments used by Benazir's political opponents to discredit her governments.

The Karachi Violence: MQM and Ethnic Politics

Karachi, Pakistan's largest city and commercial capital, was descending into escalating ethnic violence through 1987. The Muhajir Qaumi Movement (MQM), founded in 1984 by Altaf Hussain, had emerged as the dominant political force among Karachi's Urdu-speaking muhajir community, the descendants of those who had migrated from India at Partition.

The MQM's political rise coincided with — and partly caused — violent clashes between the muhajir community and Pashtuns who had settled in Karachi in large numbers during the Afghan war, as

well as with Sindhis and other groups. Karachi's ethnic mosaic, under pressure from rapid population growth, inadequate housing, and competition for jobs and political influence, was fragmenting into armed confrontation.

The Hyderabad massacre of September 1988 — in which dozens of people were killed in a single day of violence — was a harbinger of the far worse urban warfare that would engulf Karachi in the early 1990s. The city that generated a large fraction of Pakistan's tax revenue and virtually all its port-based trade was becoming ungovernable.

1988 Zia Dies; Pakistan Votes; Benazir Becomes Prime Minister

The Most Momentous Year in Pakistan Since 1971

The Ojhri Camp Explosion: 10 April 1988

On 10 April 1988, the Ojhri Camp — a massive ISI-managed weapons depot on the outskirts of Rawalpindi used to store American arms destined for the Afghan mujahideen — exploded catastrophically. Thousands of rockets, artillery shells, and missiles rained down on Rawalpindi and Islamabad, killing over a hundred civilians (official figures; independent estimates were higher), injuring thousands, and causing widespread destruction across both cities.

The cause of the explosion was never definitively established. Afghan intelligence — acting for the Kabul government or the Soviet Union — was the most widely cited explanation, but ISI mismanagement of the depot's enormous quantities of unstable ordnance was also implicated. The disaster exposed the reckless manner in which the Afghan war's logistics had been managed — enormous quantities of military hardware stored in populated areas without adequate security or safety protocols.

Prime Minister Junejo demanded a full inquiry into the Ojhri disaster and announced his intention to hold the responsible parties accountable — including, by implication, the ISI and the army. This was the immediate trigger for Zia's dismissal of Junejo the following month.

Zia Dismisses Junejo: 29 May 1988

On 29 May 1988, Zia ul-Haq used Article 58(2)(b) to dismiss Prime Minister Junejo and dissolve the National Assembly. Zia's stated reasons included government corruption, law and order failures, and — most revealing — Junejo's signature of the Geneva Accords on Afghanistan without Zia's full approval.

The Geneva Accords, signed on 14 April 1988, had committed the Soviet Union to withdrawing its forces from Afghanistan within nine months, and Pakistan to stopping cross-border support for the mujahideen. Zia had reluctantly accepted the Accords but was furious that Junejo had agreed to their terms without what Zia considered adequate guarantees that a mujahideen government would replace the communist government in Kabul. The dismissal of Junejo was, at its core, a conflict over who controlled Pakistan's Afghanistan policy — the elected Prime Minister or the President-General.

The dismissal of Junejo — Pakistan's first attempt at civilian governance in over a decade — demonstrated that Article 58(2)(b) was not a theoretical threat but a real instrument of presidential power. No civilian Prime Minister could afford to forget that the President could dismiss them at will. This knowledge fundamentally distorted the behaviour of every Prime Minister who followed.

17 August 1988: The Death of Zia ul-Haq

On 17 August 1988, Pakistan Air Force C-130 Hercules aircraft PAK-1, carrying President Zia ul-Haq, American Ambassador Arnold Raphel, Chairman of the US Joint Chiefs General Herbert Wassom, and a number of senior Pakistani generals, crashed minutes after take-off from Bahawalpur airfield. All 31 people aboard were killed.

The crash has never been definitively explained. A Pakistani commission of inquiry and American investigations both concluded that sabotage was the most likely cause — possibly a chemical or mechanical device introduced into the mangoes loaded onto the aircraft at Bahawalpur. Suspects ranged from Afghan intelligence (KHAD) to the CIA, the KGB, Mossad, Indian intelligence (RAW), dissident Pakistani army factions, and domestic political opponents. No definitive conclusion was ever established.

Zia's death removed the man who had dominated Pakistani politics for eleven years — the longest tenure of any Pakistani ruler. His passing created an immediate political vacuum. Chairman of the Senate Ghulam Ishaq Khan became acting President under the constitution, and elections were called. For the first time since 1977, Pakistan would choose its government through a genuinely competitive election.

> *"Zia treated politics as a chess game, Islam as a tool, and democracy as a threat. He left Pakistan more divided, more indebted to extremism, and more militarily powerful than he found it."*
>
> *— I.A. Rehman, human rights activist, writing on Zia's legacy*

The November 1988 Elections: Pakistan Chooses Benazir

The general election of 16 November 1988 was a watershed in Pakistani history — the first genuinely free and competitive election since the 1970 ballot that had led to the dismemberment of the country. Political parties competed openly, the press was relatively free, and candidates campaigned without the intimidation that had characterised previous elections.

The PPP won the largest number of National Assembly seats — 93 of 207 contested — but fell short of an outright majority. The Islami Jamhoori Ittehad (IJI), a nine-party alliance hastily assembled under ISI auspices specifically to prevent a PPP majority, won 55 seats. The MQM, contesting for the first time, won 13 seats in Karachi and Hyderabad, establishing itself as an indispensable player in coalition arithmetic.

Benazir Bhutto was invited to form the government and was sworn in as Prime Minister on 1 December 1988 — becoming the first woman ever to lead a Muslim-majority state. The symbolism was enormous: the 35-year-old daughter of the man Zia had hanged was now Pakistan's Prime Minister, governing from the same Prime Minister's House where her father had lived and been arrested.

Pakistan in 1988: Key Statistics

Population: ~107 million | Zia ul-Haq killed in air crash: 17 August 1988 | Election date: 16 November 1988 | PPP seats: 93 | IJI seats: 55 | MQM seats: 13 | PM sworn in: Benazir Bhutto, 1 December 1988 | Afghan refugees still in Pakistan: ~3.2 million | Soviet troops completing withdrawal from Afghanistan

1989 Benazir's First Government; Soviet Withdrawal; Global Changes

Pakistan Navigates Post-Cold War Uncertainties

Benazir's Government: Constrained from the Start

Benazir Bhutto's first government began under conditions that made effective governance almost impossible. She had no majority in the National Assembly and needed to maintain a coalition with the MQM — a relationship of mutual mistrust that would collapse violently. President Ghulam Ishaq Khan — a wily civil servant who had served every government since Ayub — retained enormous power under the Eighth Amendment and viewed Benazir with barely concealed hostility. The military, particularly the ISI, maintained its autonomy on Afghanistan and India policy, not fully accepting direction from the new civilian government.

Benazir's most significant political constraint was her inability to appoint senior military officers, pursue cases against ISI officials who had operated against the PPP, or reverse the Hudood Ordinances — moves that would have consolidated her political base but that the military and President would not accept. She governed carefully, trying not to provoke those who had the power to dismiss her, and the caution constrained her effectiveness.

On the positive side, Benazir's government restored press freedom, released political prisoners, and created a more open political atmosphere. Economic policy was managed relatively competently. She pursued a programme of poverty alleviation (the People's Programme) and attempted to attract foreign investment. But the structural constraints — fiscal deficit, debt servicing obligations, and aid dependency — left limited room for manoeuvre.

The Soviet Withdrawal from Afghanistan: February 1989

On 15 February 1989, the last Soviet troops crossed the Friendship Bridge from Afghanistan into the Soviet republic of Uzbekistan, completing the withdrawal agreed in the Geneva Accords. General Boris Gromov, commanding the withdrawal, was the last soldier to cross. The Soviet-Afghan War — nine years of brutal conflict — was over.

For Pakistan, the Soviet withdrawal was simultaneously a triumph and the beginning of a new set of problems. The strategic objective — expelling the Soviet military from Afghanistan — had been achieved. But the post-withdrawal situation was far from the Pakistani-backed mujahideen government that Zia and the ISI had hoped for. The communist government of Najibullah survived in Kabul, supported by continued Soviet economic and military assistance. The mujahideen, unable to agree on a political programme or unite militarily, failed to take Kabul.

Pakistan now faced the consequences of its Afghan policy choices. Three million Afghan refugees remained in NWFP and Balochistan — there was no immediate prospect of their return. The weapons that had been funnelled to the mujahideen were dispersing into Pakistan's own society. The ISI-supported mujahideen factions, particularly Hekmatyar's Hizb-e-Islami, were fighting each other as much as the Kabul government. Afghanistan was sliding toward a civil war that would make the Soviet occupation look orderly.

Operation Midnight Jackal: Failed Coup Plot

In October 1989, Pakistani authorities announced the uncovering of 'Operation Midnight Jackal' — an alleged conspiracy involving army officers and politicians to bribe members of parliament to vote against the Benazir government in a no-confidence motion. The plot was attributed to Brigadier Imtiaz Ahmed of ISI political cell and General Hamid Gul (former ISI chief), working with opposition politician Ghulam Mustafa Jatoi.

The operation — whether or not it constituted a formal coup plot — revealed the extent to which elements of the military and intelligence services were actively working to destabilise the elected government. It demonstrated that Pakistan's democracy was operating in a hostile environment in which those with access to state power were willing to use it against elected governments.

The no-confidence motion against Benazir was defeated in November 1989 — she survived, but barely, and the political atmosphere remained intensely hostile. Every month of governance was a battle for survival rather than an opportunity for policy implementation.

The Fall of the Berlin Wall and End of the Cold War

The fall of the Berlin Wall on 9 November 1989 and the subsequent collapse of communist governments across Eastern Europe marked the beginning of the end of the Cold War — an event with profound implications for Pakistan. Pakistan's strategic value to the United States had been defined primarily by its role in the anti-Soviet Afghan jihad. With the Cold War ending, that value was diminishing rapidly.

American policymakers who had been willing to overlook Pakistan's nuclear programme, human rights abuses, and democratic deficits because of the strategic alliance against the Soviet Union now faced fewer constraints in acting on these concerns. The Pressler Amendment — requiring annual certification that Pakistan did not possess a nuclear device — would become impossible to certify honestly in the post-Cold War environment.

The Human Rights Situation Under Benazir

Benazir's first government made genuine improvements in the human rights situation compared to the Zia era. Political prisoners were released, press censorship was relaxed, and the atmosphere of fear that had pervaded public life under martial law eased considerably. Student unions were restored at universities. The Human Rights Commission of Pakistan was established as an independent body — a significant institutional development.

However, the government's human rights record was not without blemish. In Sindh, the PPP's conflicts with the MQM produced violence in which state security forces were implicated. In Balochistan, the lingering consequences of the 1970s insurgency and ongoing political tensions created human rights concerns. The Hudood Ordinances — which Benazir had campaigned against — remained unrepealed because the political cost of challenging them was calculated as too high.

The Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch reports of 1989 acknowledged the improvement from the Zia era while documenting continuing problems: torture in police custody, extrajudicial killings by security forces in Sindh, and the continued imprisonment of women under the Zina Ordinance. Pakistan's human rights situation had improved from its worst, but remained deeply problematic.

Nuclear Programme: Approaching the Acknowledged Threshold

Through 1988 and 1989, Pakistan's nuclear programme crossed the threshold from 'possible' to 'presumed' weapons capability in American intelligence assessments. The CIA and Defense Intelligence Agency produced assessments confirming that Pakistan had produced weapons-grade enriched uranium in sufficient quantities for nuclear devices and had undertaken weapons design work including cold tests of the triggering mechanism.

Pakistan's official position remained unchanged: a peaceful nuclear programme for energy purposes. But the signals sent by Pakistani officials to American counterparts were more nuanced — suggestions that Pakistan had 'the option' or had 'the capability', without explicitly claiming to possess a weapon. This deliberate ambiguity was designed to deter India — which needed to take the nuclear capability seriously — while avoiding the formal crossing of a threshold that would trigger mandatory American sanctions under the Pressler Amendment.

1990 Benazir Dismissed; Nawaz Sharif Comes to Power

The Eighth Amendment Claims Its First Democratic Victim

The Dismissal of Benazir Bhutto: 6 August 1990

On 6 August 1990, President Ghulam Ishaq Khan used Article 58(2)(b) to dismiss Benazir Bhutto's government and dissolve the National Assembly. The charges levelled against her included corruption, nepotism, failure to maintain law and order (particularly the Karachi violence), and alleged interference in the affairs of the army. The National Assembly was dissolved and caretaker governments installed at the national and provincial levels.

The dismissal was constitutionally legal under the Eighth Amendment but politically questionable. Many of the charges against Benazir's government were either exaggerated or applied selectively — comparable or worse behaviour by military-backed governments had not attracted presidential intervention. The underlying reality was that President Ghulam Ishaq Khan, the military establishment, and the opposition had concluded that Benazir was an unacceptable Prime Minister and that the constitutional mechanism was available to remove her.

Benazir's first government had lasted 20 months — too short to accomplish much but long enough to demonstrate that democratic governance was possible in Pakistan, that a woman could lead the country, and that the PPP remained the dominant political force in Sindh and among Pakistan's poor. Her dismissal generated international criticism of Pakistan's democratic norms but little practical consequence.

The October 1990 Elections: Nawaz Sharif's First Victory

Elections held in October 1990 brought Nawaz Sharif and the Islami Jamhoori Ittehad (IJI) to power with a large majority — 105 National Assembly seats to the PPP's 45. The election campaign was marked by allegations of massive pre-poll rigging: the ISI and provincial governments allegedly distributed funds to anti-PPP candidates, harassed PPP workers, and manipulated media coverage. The 'ten per cent commission' allegation against Asif Zardari featured prominently in anti-PPP campaigning.

Nawaz Sharif was a very different political figure from Benazir Bhutto. Born in Lahore in 1949 into a business family, he had been a protege of Zia ul-Haq and had served as Chief Minister of Punjab under the Zia-era arrangements. He was a populist with a businessman's instincts, deeply connected to Punjab's commercial and industrial classes, and with an ability to speak the language of the bazaar that resonated with Pakistan's urban middle class.

The Pressler Amendment Triggered: American Aid Cut Off

In October 1990, President George H.W. Bush was unable to certify — as required by the Pressler Amendment — that Pakistan did not possess a nuclear explosive device. American economic and military aid to Pakistan was immediately cut off. The aid suspension — covering hundreds of millions of dollars annually plus the delivery of 28 F-16 aircraft already paid for by Pakistan — was a severe blow.

Pakistan was furious at what it regarded as American abandonment after years of strategic partnership in the Afghan war. The Pressler Amendment was widely characterised in Pakistan as

discriminatory — why was India's nuclear programme tolerated while Pakistan's was punished? The sentiment that Pakistan had been 'used' by the United States for the Afghan war and then discarded was deeply held and politically potent.

The aid cut-off accelerated Pakistan's search for alternative strategic partners. The China relationship became more important than ever. Relations with Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states were cultivated for both financial and diplomatic support. And the nuclear programme, far from being rolled back, continued.

The First Gulf War: Pakistan's Difficult Position

Iraq's invasion of Kuwait on 2 August 1990 created a difficult diplomatic situation for Pakistan. Saudi Arabia — Pakistan's most important Muslim ally and financial patron — was directly threatened and appealed for support. But Iraq under Saddam Hussein had significant Pakistani public sympathy, and elements of the Pakistani political and religious establishment were uncomfortable with the idea of American-led forces in the Arabian Peninsula.

Pakistan ultimately contributed approximately 11,000 troops to the Saudi defence force as part of the multinational coalition, keeping them out of the offensive against Iraq itself. This careful positioning — supporting Saudi Arabia's defence without participating in the offensive — navigated the domestic political sensitivities while maintaining the crucial Saudi relationship. Pakistani troops served creditably in Saudi Arabia, and Saudi Arabia's gratitude was expressed in continued financial support.

1991 Nawaz Sharif's Economic Reforms; Afghanistan Collapses

Privatisation, Deregulation, and the Mujahideen's Civil War

Nawaz Sharif's Economic Liberalisation

Nawaz Sharif's first government pursued an agenda of economic liberalisation that marked a significant departure from the statist policies of the Bhutto and even the Zia eras. The government launched a privatisation programme, selling state enterprises — banks, telecommunications, industrial units — to private buyers. Import licensing was liberalised, tariffs were reduced, and foreign exchange controls were eased.

The most visible initiative was the 'Yellow Cab Scheme' — a government programme that provided subsidised loans for Pakistanis to purchase taxis, generating enormous small-scale employment and popular goodwill. Similar schemes for tractors and motorcycles followed. These populist economic interventions were popular but not always fiscally sustainable.

Deregulation of the banking sector allowed new private banks to open — a significant change from the era of nationalised banking. These new banks brought competition, improved services, and — in some cases — opportunities for politically connected owners to access cheap capital. The privatisation process was frequently criticised for favouring politically connected buyers at below-market prices.

The Collapse of the Soviet Union and Afghanistan's Civil War

The dissolution of the Soviet Union on 25 December 1991 ended the Cold War definitively and transformed the strategic environment in which Pakistan operated. Soviet economic support for the Najibullah government in Kabul collapsed with the USSR itself. Without Soviet patronage, the communist government's position became untenable.

Afghanistan descended into a vicious civil war among the mujahideen factions that had been armed with American and Saudi weapons channelled through the ISI. Hekmatyar's Hizb-e-Islami, backed by the ISI, fought against the Northern Alliance of Ahmad Shah Massoud and Abdul Rashid Dostum. Kabul, which had survived nine years of Soviet occupation with its urban fabric largely intact, was destroyed by mujahideen rocket attacks in the civil war that followed.

Pakistan's ISI continued to support Hekmatyar even as his forces bombarded Kabul indiscriminately, killing thousands of civilians. The preference for Islamist commanders over nationalist and ethnic leaders reflected the ISI's vision of a post-Soviet Afghanistan as a strategic asset — a friendly Islamist government that would provide Pakistan with 'strategic depth' against India.

The Shariat Bill Controversy

Nawaz Sharif attempted to pass a Shariat Bill in 1991 — legislation that would have made the Quran and Sunnah the supreme law of Pakistan, overriding all other legislation. The bill passed the National Assembly but was blocked in the Senate. It reflected Nawaz Sharif's alliance with the religious right — particularly the Jamaat-e-Islami — and his political strategy of outflanking the PPP on the right by positioning himself as a champion of Islamic values.

The Shariat Bill was deeply alarming to Pakistan's minority communities and to many lawyers, judges, and civil society activists who feared it would fundamentally undermine the existing legal framework. The bill's defeat in the Senate was a rare legislative check on government excess, but the episode illustrated the persistent pressure to further Islamise Pakistan's legal order.

The Karachi Crisis Deepens

Karachi's ethnic violence intensified dramatically through 1991. The MQM — now operating with a paramilitary wing that the government was either unable or unwilling to disarm — was engaged in armed confrontations with Pashtun and Sindhi groups. Targeted killings of ethnic and political opponents became routine. The police, infiltrated by and often aligned with various ethnic factions, were unable or unwilling to maintain order.

The city's economy — which contributed approximately 70% of Pakistan's tax revenue and was the country's main port — continued to function through sheer momentum, but at increasing cost. Businesses were extorted by ethnic gangs. Professionals and entrepreneurs emigrated. Property values in affected areas collapsed. The social fabric of what had been a vibrant, cosmopolitan city was being destroyed by political violence.

General Asif Nawaz Janjua and Civil-Military Tensions

The death of General Mirza Aslam Beg as COAS and the appointment of General Asif Nawaz Janjua in August 1991 brought a new military personality into Pakistan's political dynamics. Janjua was known for his professionalism and relatively straightforward approach — he was less overtly political than his predecessor Beg, who had made no secret of his views on domestic and foreign policy.

However, Janjua's relationship with Nawaz Sharif's government was strained. The Chief Minister of Punjab's increasingly assertive posture — seeking to expand civilian control over areas the military considered its domain — created friction. Janjua died of a heart attack in January 1993, before the civilian-military confrontation of that year reached its climax.

Pakistan and the New World Order

The early 1990s required Pakistan to navigate a dramatically transformed international environment. The Cold War's end removed the strategic rationale for America's tolerance of Pakistan's nuclear programme and democratic deficits. The Gulf War had demonstrated American military dominance and the primacy of oil politics. The collapse of the Soviet Union opened new possibilities in Central Asia.

Pakistan's geographic position — bordering Afghanistan, Iran, China, and India, and close to the Gulf — remained strategically valuable, but the terms of its strategic value had changed. American interest in Pakistan shifted from the Cold War partnership of the Afghan jihad era toward concerns about nuclear proliferation, terrorism (a concept being redefined in this period), and the stability of a nuclear-armed state.

China remained Pakistan's most reliable external partner — a relationship of consistent mutual support that survived changes of government in both countries and the dramatic shifts in the international environment. Chinese assistance to Pakistan's nuclear programme — including the supply of a complete nuclear weapon design and 50 kilograms of weapons-grade uranium — was documented by American intelligence, though both countries denied it.

1992 Cricket World Cup Victory; Nawaz-Military Tensions; Kabul Falls

A Moment of National Pride Amid Deepening Political Crisis

Pakistan Wins the Cricket World Cup: 25 March 1992

On 25 March 1992, Pakistan's cricket team, led by Imran Khan, defeated England by 22 runs in the Cricket World Cup final at the Melbourne Cricket Ground to win Pakistan's first World Cup. The victory was one of the greatest moments of national pride in Pakistan's history — celebrated across the country with a joy that transcended ethnic, provincial, and political divisions.

Pakistan's World Cup campaign had been improbable almost to the point of miracle — the team had nearly been eliminated in the group stage before an extraordinary run of victories. Imran Khan's leadership, Wasim Akram's devastating reverse swing bowling in the final, Inzamam ul-Haq's match-winning innings, and Mushtaq Ahmed's wrist-spin had combined to produce a performance that announced Pakistan to the world as a cricket superpower.

The victory had a political aftermath. Imran Khan had promised to use any prize money to build a cancer hospital in memory of his mother — a promise he kept by establishing the Shaukat Khanum Memorial Cancer Hospital in Lahore in 1994. The project demonstrated Imran's organisational capabilities and moral credibility, and began his transition from cricket hero to political figure. Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) would be founded in 1996.

The Collapse of the Nawaz-Military Relationship

Nawaz Sharif's relationship with the military establishment — which had supported his rise through the Zia era — began to deteriorate seriously in 1992. The immediate trigger was a political crisis: the Chief of Army Staff, General Asif Nawaz Janjua, was openly critical of what he regarded as civilian interference in military affairs and corruption within the Nawaz government.

The 'midnight jackals' affair had a new chapter: in April 1992, information emerged of army-political conspiracies that again implicated intelligence officials in efforts to destabilise civilian politics. The relationship between Nawaz Sharif and the army became defined by mutual suspicion — Nawaz suspected the military of planning to remove him; the military suspected Nawaz of trying to assert civilian supremacy over areas they regarded as their exclusive domain.

The Fall of Kabul: April 1992

In April 1992, the communist government of President Najibullah collapsed as mujahideen forces advanced on Kabul. Najibullah took refuge in a UN compound where he would remain until his brutal murder by the Taliban in 1996. Kabul fell to a patchwork of mujahideen factions, and the fighting between them for control of the city intensified.

Pakistan's favoured commander Hekmatyar was unable to take Kabul, which fell instead to Ahmad Shah Massoud's forces. Hekmatyar's response was to bombard the city with rockets and artillery from the surrounding hills, causing enormous civilian casualties and destruction. The Pakistani government's inability to translate its Afghan investment into a favourable political outcome — a pro-Pakistan government in Kabul — was becoming apparent. Afghanistan's civil war would continue until the Taliban's emergence as a major force in 1994.

Babri Masjid Demolition: December 1992

The demolition of the Babri Masjid mosque in Ayodhya, India, by Hindu nationalist mobs on 6 December 1992 sent shockwaves across Pakistan and the Muslim world. The mosque, built on a site that Hindu nationalists claimed was the birthplace of the god Ram, had been a flashpoint of Hindu-Muslim tension for decades. Its destruction by a mob, with Indian security forces standing by, triggered riots across India and Pakistan.

In Pakistan, the emotional reaction was intense. Mosques and Hindu temples in Pakistan were attacked in retaliatory violence. The Pakistani government expressed outrage and the event became a major focus of political mobilisation for religious parties. The Kashmir conflict gained new emotional resonance as Pakistan's argument — that India was an inherently hostile Hindu state — appeared validated.

1993 Double Dismissal, Army Intervention, and Benazir Returns

Pakistan's Constitutional Crisis Resolved by Military Mediation

President Dismisses Nawaz; Supreme Court Restores Him

On 18 April 1993, President Ghulam Ishaq Khan again deployed Article 58(2)(b) — this time to dismiss Nawaz Sharif's government, dissolving the National Assembly on charges of corruption and incompetence. It was the same constitutional mechanism that had been used against Benazir in 1990.

In an unprecedented development, the Supreme Court of Pakistan — exercising its judicial review powers — overturned the president's dismissal order in May 1993 and reinstated Nawaz Sharif as Prime Minister. The Supreme Court ruled that the President had acted without sufficient constitutional grounds. It was a historic assertion of judicial independence, the first time a court had successfully challenged a presidential dismissal under Article 58(2)(b).

The reinstatement created a constitutional and political stalemate: a Prime Minister and President who both despised each other, both constitutionally valid, and both incapable of governing together. The army — under new COAS General Abdul Waheed Kakar — was asked to mediate. Its solution was characteristically direct: both Nawaz Sharif and Ghulam Ishaq Khan were persuaded — under unmistakable military pressure — to resign simultaneously. Caretaker governments were installed and fresh elections announced.

The October 1993 Elections: Benazir Returns to Power

The general election of October 1993 returned Benazir Bhutto to power with the PPP winning 86 National Assembly seats to the PML-N's 72. Farooq Leghari — a PPP loyalist — was elected President. For the first time since 1988, the President and Prime Minister came from the same party, theoretically reducing the risk of Article 58(2)(b) being used against the government.

Benazir's second government began in more favourable circumstances than her first. She had a more comfortable parliamentary position, a sympathetic President, and the experience of her first government to draw upon. Her economic team — led by Finance Minister Sartaj Aziz — pursued relatively orthodox macroeconomic policies, negotiating with the IMF and World Bank for stabilisation support.

The Kashmir Insurgency Intensifies

The armed insurgency in Indian-administered Kashmir, which had begun in 1989, continued to intensify through 1993. Young Kashmiri men, alienated by Indian government repression and inspired by the Afghan jihad's success against the Soviet Union, were taking up arms against Indian security forces. The ISI was providing training, weapons, and organisational support to various militant groups operating across the Line of Control.

Pakistan's official position was that it provided only 'moral and diplomatic' support to Kashmiri 'freedom fighters'. In reality, the ISI's involvement in training and equipping militant groups was extensive and well-documented by Indian intelligence. The groups ranged from Kashmiri nationalist organisations like the JKLF (which sought independence) to pan-Islamist groups like Hizbul Mujahideen and the Harkat-ul-Ansar (which sought merger with Pakistan).

India's response — deploying hundreds of thousands of security forces, using torture and extrajudicial killings extensively, and imposing harsh collective punishments — generated its own cycle of alienation and radicalisation. The Kashmir conflict was entering its most violent phase, with thousands of deaths annually and a fundamental breakdown of trust between the Kashmiri population and the Indian state.

The Judicial Assertion: Benazir's Restoration and the Courts

The Supreme Court's restoration of Nawaz Sharif in May 1993 — overturning President Ghulam Ishaq Khan's dismissal under Article 58(2)(b) — was a landmark moment in Pakistani judicial history. It demonstrated that the superior courts could and would exercise meaningful review of presidential actions, not merely rubber-stamp executive authority.

The restoration was a Pyrrhic victory for Nawaz: he was legally reinstated but politically paralysed, facing a hostile President and a National Assembly that had lost confidence in his ability to govern. The army's subsequent mediation — resulting in both Nawaz and the President resigning simultaneously — was presented as a constitutional solution but was in reality a military determination of political outcomes dressed in civilian garb.

The episode established several important precedents: that the Supreme Court could review presidential actions, that the army could mediate constitutional crises, and that the Eighth Amendment created inherently unstable government rather than stable executive authority. These lessons would inform Pakistani constitutional jurisprudence and political practice for the following decades.

Women in Power: The Benazir Paradox

Benazir Bhutto's leadership raised profound questions about the relationship between women's political leadership and women's rights in Pakistan. She was the first female Prime Minister of a Muslim-majority country — a historic achievement with enormous symbolic importance worldwide. Yet the actual advancement of women's rights under her governments was limited.

The Hudood Ordinances — which Benazir had campaigned against — remained unrepealed during both her terms. The Women's Division was upgraded to a full Ministry of Women's Development, and Women's Development Centres were established. But the structural discrimination embedded in Pakistani law and social practice was not fundamentally challenged.

The explanation lies partly in political calculation: repealing the Hudood Ordinances would have provided the religious parties with a devastating campaign weapon and risked alienating conservative voters. It also lies in the limits of individual leadership in a system designed to prevent transformative governance. Benazir could not change what the system, the military, and the political arithmetic did not allow her to change.

1994 The Taliban Emerge; Karachi's Urban War; Economic Strain

Pakistan's Afghan Policy Creates a Monster; Cities Burn

The Emergence of the Taliban

The most consequential development of 1994 — with implications that would reverberate for decades — was the emergence of the Taliban as a significant military and political force in southern Afghanistan. The Taliban (meaning 'students' in Pashto) were predominantly young men educated in Pakistani madrassas — particularly Deobandi madrassas in Balochistan and NWFP that had been established and funded by Saudi money during the Afghan war. They were combat-hardened, religiously indoctrinated, and motivated by a puritanical vision of Islamic governance.

In October 1994, a Taliban force of a few hundred fighters under Mullah Mohammad Omar captured Kandahar, Afghanistan's second city, after disarming local warlords and executing notorious criminals who had been terrorising the population. The Taliban's initial actions — imposing order, disarming militias, punishing bandits who had made roads impassable — won widespread popular relief among an Afghan population exhausted by years of warlord violence.

Pakistan's intelligence services, particularly the ISI under General Naseem Rana, saw in the Taliban a potential solution to the Afghanistan problem: a force that could impose order, defeat Hekmatyar (who had proved unable to take Kabul), and create the pro-Pakistan Islamist government in Kabul that the ISI had sought since 1979. Pakistani support — financial, logistical, and military — was provided to the Taliban from the earliest stages of their rise.

Karachi's Full-Scale Urban War

Karachi in 1994 was in the grip of what amounted to a low-intensity urban war. The MQM's paramilitary wing was engaged in armed confrontations with Pashtun gangs (the so-called 'Afghan mafia'), Sindhi nationalist groups, and the security forces themselves. Targeted killings were running at dozens per month. Entire neighbourhoods were effectively controlled by ethnic or criminal gangs.

The PPP provincial government in Sindh launched a series of operations against MQM strongholds in 1992 and 1994, using paramilitary Rangers and police. The operations were brutal and in some cases indiscriminate, with allegations of extrajudicial killings and torture. The MQM accused the federal and provincial governments of conducting a political pogrom against the muhajir community. The government accused the MQM of being a terrorist organisation hiding behind a political facade.

Altaf Hussain, the MQM's leader, had fled Pakistan in 1992 and was conducting the party's operations from London — a fact that itself illustrated the extraordinary dysfunction of Pakistani governance. A major political party's leader was directing violence and political activity from a foreign country while evading Pakistani law.

Economic Challenges: Debt, Deficit, and IMF Conditionality

Pakistan's economy in 1994 was under severe strain. The fiscal deficit — the gap between government spending and revenue — was running at around 8% of GDP, one of the highest in Asia. Debt servicing (repayment of foreign and domestic loans plus interest) consumed an enormous share of government revenue, leaving little for development or social spending. Inflation

was high, the currency was under pressure, and foreign exchange reserves were inadequate.

The IMF and World Bank were pressing Pakistan to implement structural adjustment: reduce the fiscal deficit, privatise state enterprises, reform the taxation system, and cut subsidies. These measures were economically sound but politically painful. Successive governments — both PPP and PML-N — went through the motions of IMF compliance while avoiding the most politically costly measures, particularly expanding the tax base to include agriculture and the wealthy.

Pakistan's tax-to-GDP ratio was one of the lowest in the world — around 12-13% — reflecting both structural weaknesses (the informal economy, agricultural tax exemptions) and political failures (the wealthy and politically connected evading taxation). Without revenue, governments could not fund the schools, hospitals, and infrastructure that Pakistan desperately needed.

The Shaukat Khanum Hospital: Imran Khan's Social Work

December 1994 saw the inauguration of the Shaukat Khanum Memorial Cancer Hospital and Research Centre in Lahore — the project that Imran Khan had promised at the 1992 World Cup victory. Built through an extraordinary fundraising campaign that drew donations from Pakistanis across the country and the diaspora, the hospital provided cancer treatment on a sliding-scale fee basis, with 75% of patients treated free of charge.

The Shaukat Khanum project demonstrated several important things about Pakistan: the extraordinary capacity for philanthropic generosity among ordinary Pakistanis; Imran Khan's organisational ability and moral credibility; and the failure of the state to provide basic health services that civil society was having to supply. The hospital's success gave Imran Khan a credibility base from which to launch his political career.

The Heroin Economy and Its Social Consequences

Pakistan's heroin epidemic, which had begun with the Afghan war in the early 1980s, remained a serious social crisis through the mid-1990s. An estimated 1.5-2 million Pakistanis were addicted to heroin by the mid-1990s — one of the highest rates in the world. The epidemic was concentrated in NWFP and among urban youth, but had spread to all provinces and social classes.

The government's anti-narcotics efforts were chronically underfunded and undermined by the complicity of political figures and security services in the drug trade. Pakistan had become one of the world's major heroin processing and transit countries — Afghan opium was refined into heroin in facilities in Balochistan and NWFP and then exported to European markets. The drug trade generated billions of dollars annually, corrupting police, customs officials, and politicians.

The social consequences extended beyond addiction: crime rates increased in affected areas; HIV transmission through shared needles began to emerge as a public health concern; and the breakdown of family structures caused by addiction created generational damage. The heroin epidemic was one of the most direct and devastating consequences of Pakistan's strategic decision to host the Afghan jihad.

Pakistan's Nuclear Diplomacy: The Bomb in the Basement

Through the early 1990s, Pakistan maintained what analysts called a 'bomb in the basement' posture — an undeclared but widely understood nuclear weapons capability that provided deterrence without the formal crossing of the threshold that would trigger international sanctions. American intelligence assessments concluded that Pakistan possessed enough weapons-grade uranium for several devices and had the technical capability to assemble them.

Pakistani officials played a sophisticated game of nuclear ambiguity: neither confirming nor denying weapons possession, while making statements that made the deterrent message clear to India. Foreign Minister Sahabzada Yaqub Khan and others spoke of Pakistan's 'unsafeguarded nuclear programme' and 'deterrence options' in ways that communicated capability without formal declaration.

India's response was to maintain its own 'recessed deterrent' posture — weapons components assembled but not mated — and to continue its ballistic missile programme. The South Asian nuclear standoff, with both countries possessing weapons but neither formally declaring them, created an arms dynamic that made the 1998 nuclear tests almost inevitable once domestic political pressures in both countries aligned.

1995 Sectarian Terrorism, Karachi Operations, and Nuclear Revelations

Pakistan's Deepest Domestic Security Crisis Since 1971

The Army Operation in Karachi: June 1995

By mid-1995, Karachi's law and order situation had deteriorated to the point where the federal government declared a state of emergency and launched a major military operation in the city. The Karachi operation — conducted by the Pakistan Rangers and army units — was directed primarily against the MQM, which the government characterised as a terrorist organisation operating a torture cells network and conducting systematic targeted killings.

The operation was brutal and controversial. Rangers conducted raids on MQM offices and strongholds, arrested hundreds of activists, and killed a number of MQM militants in what the government called 'encounters' but human rights organisations described as extrajudicial executions. The MQM — and international human rights organisations — documented cases of torture in Rangers custody.

The operation did reduce the scale of violence in Karachi over the following years, but at a severe human rights cost and without addressing the underlying political and economic grievances that had generated the MQM's confrontational politics. Altaf Hussain continued to direct the party from London, and the MQM maintained its political base despite the operation.

Sectarian Terrorism Reaches a New Level

The sectarian conflict between Shia and Sunni militant organisations reached new levels of ferocity in 1995. The Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan (SSP) and its even more extreme offshoot Lashkar-e-Jhangvi were conducting systematic assassinations of Shia religious leaders, professionals, and community figures. The Sipah-e-Muhammad (a Shia militant organisation) was carrying out retaliatory killings of Sunni leaders.

The Pakistani state's response was inadequate and inconsistent. Some sectarian leaders were arrested and prosecuted; others were tolerated or even protected because of their connections to the ISI's Afghan jihad networks. The Deobandi militant organisations in particular occupied a complicated position: they were responsible for sectarian violence within Pakistan but were also part of the jihadist infrastructure that the ISI was using for Afghanistan and Kashmir.

The attack on the Egyptian Embassy in Islamabad in November 1995 — carried out by Egyptian Islamic Jihad with possible connections to international jihadist networks — demonstrated that Pakistan's tolerance of militant organisations was creating blowback within its own territory. International jihadist figures connected to what would become al-Qaeda were using Peshawar and other Pakistani cities as operational bases.

Benazir's Second Government: Performance and Problems

Benazir Bhutto's second government (1993–1996) was characterised by reasonable macroeconomic management alongside persistent governance failures. The Gross Domestic Product grew at around 5% annually, inflation was brought down, and the fiscal deficit reduced. The government attracted foreign investment in power generation — private power projects that addressed Pakistan's chronic electricity shortages but at high costs that would later become a

major financial burden.

The governance failures were equally real. Corruption allegations against Asif Zardari — including commissions on the power projects and other government contracts — were persistent and credible. Asif Zardari's position as Benazir's husband gave him informal power that he used with little restraint. The appointment of loyalists over competent professionals, interference in the judiciary, and political use of state institutions all undermined the government's effectiveness.

Benazir attempted several significant initiatives: the Social Action Programme to improve primary health and education; Women's Development Centres (WAJCs) to provide economic opportunities for women; and diplomatic outreach to India and the United States to improve Pakistan's international standing. These initiatives had merit but were poorly implemented and underfunded.

Foreign Policy: India Dialogue and American Relations

Pakistan's foreign policy in 1995 was focused on two primary challenges: managing the difficult relationship with India and repairing the damage done to US-Pakistan relations by the Pressler Amendment sanctions. Benazir Bhutto made several overtures to India, proposing a 'non-aggression pact' and expressing willingness to discuss all bilateral issues including Kashmir. India under Prime Ministers Rao and then Deve Gowda was similarly interested in reducing tensions.

The Composite Dialogue process between India and Pakistan — covering eight 'baskets' of issues including Kashmir, trade, cultural exchanges, and people-to-people contact — was initiated in this period. Progress was slow and the fundamental disagreement on Kashmir remained intractable, but the dialogue framework represented a genuine attempt at normalisation.

American relations improved somewhat after the Cold War's end enabled a more nuanced engagement. The Brown Amendment of 1995 allowed a one-time release of some military equipment already paid for by Pakistan, partially addressing the injustice of Pakistan paying for equipment and then being denied it. But the fundamental nuclear disagreement remained unresolved.

Taliban's Advance in Afghanistan

Through 1995, the Taliban continued their extraordinary military advance across Afghanistan. From their base in Kandahar, they captured province after province, disarming warlords and imposing their harsh interpretation of sharia law. Their advance was facilitated by Pakistani logistical support — fuel, vehicles, ammunition, and ISI advisers — and by the exhaustion of the Afghan population with the endless warlord violence.

The Taliban's model of governance was becoming clear: total prohibition of music, television, and cinema; complete exclusion of women from public life including education and employment; mandatory beards for men and burqas for women; and brutal enforcement of their rules through public floggings and executions. These policies horrified international observers but attracted little immediate international response.

Pakistan — along with Saudi Arabia and the UAE — was moving toward formal recognition of the Taliban as the legitimate government of Afghanistan, a position that would isolate Pakistan internationally when the Taliban took Kabul in 1996 and their policies attracted global condemnation.

Pakistan in 1995: Statistical Snapshot

Population: ~130 million | Prime Minister: Benazir Bhutto (2nd term, since Oct 1993) | President: Farooq Leghari | GDP growth: ~5% | Tax-to-GDP ratio: ~12-13% | Karachi operation: ongoing (from Jun 1995) | Afghan refugees still in Pakistan: ~1.5-2 million | Taliban control: southern and western Afghanistan |

Nuclear programme: undeclared but assumed weapons-ready

The Pattern of Pakistani Democracy 1988–1995

Understanding the Decade of Musical Chairs

Why No Government Completed Its Term

The defining feature of Pakistani politics between 1988 and 1997 was that no elected government completed its constitutional term. Benazir Bhutto's first government was dismissed after 20 months; Nawaz Sharif's first government after 30 months; the double dismissal of 1993 ended both the President and Prime Minister; and Benazir's second government would be dismissed in 1996. This pattern of instability was not accidental: it reflected deep structural problems in Pakistan's political system.

The Eighth Amendment (Article 58(2)(b)) was the constitutional mechanism through which presidents dismissed governments, but it required a president willing to use it. Both Ghulam Ishaq Khan (who dismissed both Benazir and Nawaz) and later Farooq Leghari (who dismissed Benazir in 1996) did so with at least the tacit support of the military establishment. The army was never the formal dismisser of civilian governments in this period — it used constitutional proxies instead.

The deeper causes of instability included: the absence of a tradition of loyal opposition (losing parties immediately sought to destabilise winning ones rather than organise for the next election); the weakness of political institutions relative to the military and bureaucracy; the personal rivalries between Benazir and Nawaz that became consuming obsessions; and the failure of any government to address the structural economic problems that generated popular disillusionment with democratic politics.

Civil-Military Relations: The Troika System

Pakistan's political system in the 1988–1999 period was dominated by what analysts called the 'troika' — the three-way power relationship between the Prime Minister, the President, and the Chief of Army Staff. Formally, the President and Prime Minister were constitutional officers and the COAS was a military official subordinate to civilian authority. In practice, the COAS was often the most powerful figure in the troika.

The army expressed its influence through several mechanisms: control of foreign policy (particularly the nuclear programme, Afghanistan, and India policy), autonomy in its own institutional affairs (budget, promotions, procurement), intelligence penetration of political parties and the media, and — when necessary — support for presidential dismissals of governments it found unacceptable.

Pakistani Prime Ministers were acutely aware of these constraints. Benazir Bhutto's consistent refusal to challenge the army directly — accepting limits on her authority over the nuclear programme and Afghanistan policy — reflected her understanding that direct confrontation would result in her dismissal. Nawaz Sharif's more assertive approach — eventually leading to his 1999 attempt to remove General Musharraf — ended in the military coup that terminated the entire democratic experiment.

The Role of the ISI in Domestic Politics

The Inter-Services Intelligence directorate's role in Pakistan's domestic politics was one of the most controversial and consequential features of the 1985–1995 period. The ISI had developed its domestic political cell during the Zia years as an instrument of martial law management. After 1988, this political cell continued to operate, monitoring political parties, cultivating relationships with

politicians, and on occasion actively working to shape political outcomes.

The most documented example was the ISI's role in forming the Islami Jamhoori Ittehad in 1988 specifically to prevent a PPP majority — an operation that involved the distribution of funds to anti-PPP candidates. ISI chief General Hamid Gul's involvement in this operation was so overt that even the ISI's institutional reputation was briefly tarnished.

The ISI's domestic political role was a fundamental violation of the constitutional principle that the military is subordinate to civilian authority. A military intelligence organisation that ran political operations against elected governments was not a servant of the state but a state within the state — an autonomous actor with its own political preferences and the tools to implement them.

Pakistan's Economy 1985–1995: Boom, Bust, and Structural Weakness

A Decade of Growth That Left the Fundamentals Unchanged

The Aid-to-Remittance Transition

Pakistan's economy underwent a significant structural shift in the late 1980s and early 1990s as the Afghan war aid that had sustained growth through the Zia era was replaced — partially — by workers' remittances from the Gulf and increased domestic economic activity. The total of remittances reached approximately $2-3 billion annually, making it one of the largest sources of foreign exchange.

The Pressler Amendment's 1990 aid cut-off removed a significant source of budgetary support at a time when Pakistan was also dealing with the aftermath of the Afghan war and the fiscal consequences of political instability. The government increasingly relied on commercial borrowing — at higher interest rates than concessional aid — to finance its deficit, creating a debt trap that worsened with each passing year.

Privatisation and Its Contradictions

Both the Nawaz Sharif and Benazir Bhutto governments pursued privatisation of state enterprises, but with mixed results and significant governance failures. The privatisation programme — encouraged by the World Bank and IMF as part of structural adjustment — transferred state assets to private buyers, in principle improving efficiency and reducing the government's burden of subsidising loss-making enterprises.

In practice, the privatisation process was frequently corrupted. Assets were sold at below-market prices to politically connected buyers. The proceeds were not always used to reduce debt or invest in public services. Privatised telecommunications and banking sectors performed better than their nationalised predecessors, but the political economy of privatisation created new opportunities for rent-seeking rather than competitive markets.

The Independent Power Producer Crisis

One of Benazir Bhutto's government's significant initiatives was the encouragement of private investment in electricity generation through the Independent Power Producer (IPP) framework. Pakistan had a chronic electricity shortage that was constraining economic growth; the government offered guaranteed offtake contracts and high guaranteed returns to attract private investment in power plants.

The IPP framework did bring new generating capacity — essential for Pakistan's development — but the contracts negotiated were extraordinarily generous to investors. The guaranteed returns, denominated in US dollars and passed through to electricity consumers, created a massive long-term liability for the government and electricity consumers. The 'circular debt' problem — where the government owed money to power producers who owed money to fuel suppliers who owed money to the government — became one of Pakistan's most intractable economic problems.

Social Transformation in Pakistan 1985–1995

How a Decade of Politics Shaped Society

The Media Revolution: Private Television Begins

The early 1990s saw the beginning of Pakistan's media revolution. While Pakistan Television Corporation (PTV) maintained its national broadcasting monopoly domestically, satellite television — particularly Star TV and later dedicated Pakistani channels — began reaching urban households with a window to the wider world.

The liberalisation of the media environment, while incomplete, created new spaces for political commentary and entertainment that were outside state control. FM radio, not yet deregulated for private operators, was a government monopoly, but cassette-based music distribution and VCR culture had already created a parallel entertainment economy that the Zia-era censors had been unable to suppress.

Women's Rights: Gains and Losses

Women's status in Pakistan through this period was characterised by contradictory trends. On one hand, women's participation in the formal economy was growing — in teaching, medicine, banking, and the garment industry, women's employment expanded significantly. Benazir Bhutto's status as Prime Minister — whatever the limits of her actual feminist credentials in office — provided a powerful symbolic statement about women's capacity for public leadership.

On the other hand, the Hudood Ordinances remained on the books, discriminating against women in the courts. Honour killings — murders of women by male relatives on grounds of 'family honour' — were widespread and rarely prosecuted effectively. Domestic violence was pervasive and underreported. The conservative religious environment created by Zia's Islamisation continued to constrain women's freedom in public spaces, particularly in rural areas and smaller towns.

Demographic Pressures and the Education Emergency

Pakistan's population grew from approximately 96 million in 1985 to approximately 130 million in 1995 — a 35% increase in ten years. This explosive growth created enormous pressure on every social service: schools, hospitals, water supply, housing, and employment. The state's capacity to expand services in line with population growth was severely constrained by fiscal pressures.

The education system was in particular distress. Government schools — chronically underfunded, with poorly paid and often absent teachers, inadequate facilities, and irrelevant curricula — were failing to provide meaningful education to millions of children. The private school sector was expanding rapidly for those who could afford it, creating a two-tier education system in which the quality of a child's education depended almost entirely on their parents' income.

Pakistan's literacy rate rose from approximately 26% in 1985 to around 38% by 1995 — an improvement, but still one of the lowest rates in Asia and far below what was needed for economic development. Female literacy remained substantially below male literacy, and rural literacy lagged far behind urban. The education deficit was Pakistan's most fundamental and least-addressed developmental challenge.

Pakistan's Education, Health, and Development 1985–1995

A Decade of Population Growth Outpacing Institutional Capacity

The Primary Education Crisis

Pakistan's primary education system in the decade from 1985 to 1995 was characterised by a profound mismatch between stated policy goals and actual outcomes. Every government declared education a priority; every government allocated insufficient resources and implemented reforms with inadequate seriousness. The result was a system in which millions of children — particularly girls and those in rural areas — received no formal education, and millions more received education of such poor quality that it left them functionally illiterate.

The ghost school phenomenon was emblematic of the system's failures: schools that existed on paper, drew government salaries and budgets, but had no teachers, no students, or both. In Balochistan and interior Sindh, studies found that a majority of government primary schools were non-functional. Teachers posted to remote areas simply did not attend, paying a portion of their salary to local political figures to avoid transfer while collecting full pay.

The Social Action Programme (SAP) — introduced in 1992 with World Bank support — attempted to address these failures through conditional funding tied to performance, community monitoring, and the expansion of girls' schools. SAP produced some improvements, particularly in girls' enrolment, but was undermined by inadequate government commitment and the structural problems of a civil service culture that prioritised salary extraction over service delivery.

Health: Polio, Maternal Mortality, and the Public Health Emergency

Pakistan's public health system through this decade was overwhelmed by the combination of population growth, inadequate infrastructure, and institutional dysfunction. Infant mortality remained high; maternal mortality was among the highest in Asia; and preventable diseases including polio, tuberculosis, and childhood diarrhoea continued to claim hundreds of thousands of lives annually.

Polio was a particular public health failure of this period. Vaccination campaigns were launched but inconsistently implemented — reaching urban areas more effectively than rural ones, hampered by the difficulty of maintaining cold chains in remote areas and by occasional community resistance. Pakistan would remain one of only two countries in the world (along with Afghanistan) where polio was still endemic decades later.

The private health sector was expanding rapidly in urban areas, providing services for those who could afford them. But the majority of Pakistanis depended on a public health system that was chronically underfunded, understaffed, and often corrupt. A two-tier health system — sophisticated private care for the elite, inadequate public services for the majority — was becoming entrenched.

Infrastructure Development: Roads, Power, and Water

Pakistan's infrastructure through this decade showed genuine development alongside persistent gaps. The road network expanded significantly — the motorway programme, begun under Nawaz Sharif, started the construction of the Lahore-Islamabad motorway (M2) that would transform inter-city travel in Punjab. The Karakoram Highway linked northern Pakistan to China through spectacular mountain terrain.

Electricity generation remained chronically inadequate. Load-shedding — planned power cuts to manage insufficient generation — was a daily reality for Pakistani households and businesses through much of this decade. The Independent Power Producer policy, introduced under Benazir's second government, began to bring new private generation capacity online, but at the high long-term cost of guaranteed dollar-denominated contracts that would become one of Pakistan's most intractable financial burdens.

Water supply was a growing crisis. Pakistan's irrigation system — one of the largest in the world — was ageing and inefficient. Urban water supply systems were overwhelmed by population growth and poorly maintained. Groundwater depletion in the agricultural areas of Punjab and Sindh was accelerating as tube-well irrigation expanded without adequate regulation.

The Sindhi-Muhajir Conflict: Roots and Reality

Understanding Karachi's Ethnic War in Structural Terms

Historical Origins of the Conflict

The Sindhi-muhajir conflict that dominated Karachi's politics in the late 1980s and 1990s had deep structural roots. At Partition, the Urdu-speaking Muslim refugees from India — the muhajirs — had settled primarily in Karachi and other Sindhi cities, rapidly outnumbering the local Sindhi population in urban areas. The muhajirs brought higher levels of education and urban professional skills that gave them a disproportionate presence in the civil service, business, and professions.

The Sindhi nationalist movement — which had been building since the 1970 election and G.M. Syed's advocacy of 'Jiye Sindh' — felt that the muhajirs had taken over Sindh's cities while Sindhis remained marginalised in their own province. The 1972 language riots in Sindh — triggered by the PPP government's attempt to make Sindhi a compulsory language in government employment — had crystallised this tension.

The Afghan refugee influx of the 1980s added a third major community to Karachi's ethnic mosaic: Pashtuns from NWFP and Afghanistan, who settled in Karachi's peri-urban areas and dominated the transport and construction industries. The MQM's emergence was partly a response to Pashtun economic competition as well as Sindhi political nationalism.

The MQM: From Student Movement to Political Machine

Altaf Hussain's MQM had begun as a student organisation at Karachi University in 1984, drawing on the muhajir community's grievances about job quotas that disadvantaged them in favour of rural Sindhis and other groups. The movement rapidly built a sophisticated political organisation with a strongly hierarchical, cult-of-personality structure centred on Altaf Hussain.

The MQM's political strategy combined legitimate electoral politics with intimidation of opponents and rivals. In the constituencies it controlled — primarily in Karachi and Hyderabad — it delivered near-total electoral dominance through a combination of genuine community support and the suppression of dissent. Journalists who wrote critically about the MQM received threats; politicians who challenged it faced violence.

Altaf Hussain's departure to London in 1992 and his subsequent direction of the party from exile illustrated both the cult-of-personality nature of MQM organisation and the extraordinary dysfunction of Pakistani governance that allowed a major political party to be run from a foreign country. His telephone addresses to rallies — played through loudspeakers to hundreds of thousands — became a distinctive feature of Pakistani politics.

Pakistan's Foreign Relations 1985–1995: The Post-Cold War Pivot

From Indispensable Ally to Proliferation Pariah — and Back

The United States: From Alliance to Estrangement

The transformation of US-Pakistan relations between 1988 and 1995 was one of the most dramatic in the history of American foreign policy in South Asia. The two countries had been close strategic partners through the Afghan war, with American aid, weapons, and political support constituting the backbone of Pakistan's external security posture. Within three years of the Soviet withdrawal, the relationship had deteriorated to formal sanctions and mutual recrimination.

The Pressler Amendment's 1990 activation — cutting off all American economic and military aid — was experienced in Pakistan as a profound betrayal. Pakistan had taken enormous risks to support the Afghan jihad: absorbing three million refugees, becoming a target for Afghan and Soviet intelligence services, and allowing its territory to be used as a staging ground for what was effectively a covert American war. Having served this role, Pakistan found its American patron withdrawing support the moment the strategic purpose was served.

American concerns about Pakistan in the post-Cold War environment extended beyond the nuclear programme. American intelligence was tracking the ISI's support for militant groups in Kashmir and Afghanistan, and there were growing concerns about the relationship between Pakistani intelligence and international jihadist networks. The Clinton administration, which came to power in January 1993, pursued a more active non-proliferation agenda and was unwilling to extend the tolerance that the Reagan and Bush administrations had shown Pakistan's nuclear programme.

China: The All-Weather Friend Deepens Its Commitment

While US-Pakistan relations deteriorated, the China-Pakistan relationship deepened and broadened. Chinese assistance to Pakistan's nuclear and missile programmes was the most strategically significant dimension: China supplied complete nuclear weapon designs, highly enriched uranium, ring magnets for centrifuges, and — most consequentially — M-11 ballistic missiles capable of carrying nuclear warheads to targets across India.

The M-11 missile transfers, documented by American intelligence in the early 1990s, triggered threats of American sanctions against China under the Missile Technology Control Regime. China denied the transfers; Pakistan denied receiving them; and the Clinton administration eventually chose not to impose the full sanctions regime, prioritising the broader US-China relationship over non-proliferation enforcement.

Beyond the strategic military cooperation, China-Pakistan economic ties were also developing. Chinese construction companies were involved in major Pakistani infrastructure projects. The Karakoram Highway — built with Chinese technical and financial assistance — connected Pakistan to China through some of the world's most challenging mountain terrain and was a symbol of the partnership's endurance.

Saudi Arabia and the Gulf: Religious Money and Labour Diplomacy

Saudi Arabia remained Pakistan's most important Muslim partner through this decade, providing financial support, oil at preferential rates, and — through the Afghan jihad — a shared strategic

agenda. Pakistani workers in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf remitted billions of dollars annually, making the Gulf relationship economically indispensable.

The religious dimension of the Saudi-Pakistan relationship deepened as Saudi Arabia's Wahhabisation of Pakistani Islam — through madrassa funding, religious literature distribution, and the influence of returned migrants — continued. Pakistan was becoming increasingly integrated into a Saudi-led vision of Islamic solidarity that had significant implications for Pakistan's domestic religious politics.

The Gulf War of 1990–91 tested the relationship: Pakistan's decision to send troops to Saudi Arabia but not participate in the offensive against Iraq satisfied Saudi Arabia's immediate security need while limiting Pakistani domestic political cost. Saudi Arabia expressed its gratitude through continued financial support and favourable oil pricing.

India-Pakistan: The Kashmir War and Diplomatic Stalemate

India-Pakistan relations through this decade were dominated by the Kashmir insurgency that had begun in 1989. The armed uprising in Indian-administered Kashmir — initiated by Kashmiri nationalists alienated by Indian electoral fraud and repression, but quickly supplemented by Pakistan-backed militant groups — transformed the bilateral relationship from cold peace to active proxy conflict.

Pakistan's support for the Kashmir insurgency was multi-faceted: the ISI provided training at camps in Pakistan-administered Kashmir and Afghanistan, weapons and funding to various militant groups, and logistical support for infiltration across the Line of Control. The groups supported ranged from Kashmiri nationalist organisations like the JKLF to pan-Islamist groups with international jihadist connections.

India's response combined military suppression with international diplomacy. Half a million Indian security forces were deployed in Kashmir by the mid-1990s; human rights abuses were widespread and documented; and the civilian population was caught between two armed forces. India accused Pakistan of sponsoring terrorism; Pakistan accused India of committing genocide against Kashmiris. Both accusations contained elements of truth.

The Military in Pakistani Society 1985–1995

Institutional Power, Business Interests, and Political Influence

The Military's Economic Empire

A distinctive feature of Pakistan's military that became increasingly significant through the 1980s and 1990s was its development of a substantial commercial and economic empire, quite separate from its defence function. The Fauji Foundation — established to support the welfare of retired military personnel — had expanded from a modest welfare organisation into a major commercial conglomerate with interests in fertilisers, food production, cement, banking, and real estate.

The Army Welfare Trust, Shaheen Foundation (Air Force), and Bahria Foundation (Navy) similarly operated commercial enterprises that ranged from bakeries to aviation services. The military's cantonments — military-administered urban areas exempt from civilian local government — became centres of commercial real estate development, with Defence Housing Authorities developing some of the most valuable residential and commercial land in Karachi, Lahore, Islamabad, and other cities.

The military's commercial interests created structural incentives for institutional involvement in economic policy and politics that went beyond institutional security concerns. An institution with significant business interests needed favourable regulatory and tax treatment, access to government contracts, and protection of its economic assets — all of which required maintaining political influence beyond the purely military domain.

Military Professionalism and the Afghan War Legacy

Pakistan's army maintained high standards of professional military competence through this period. Its officers were trained at the Command and Staff College Quetta and at institutions in the United States, Britain, and China; the combat experience of the Afghan war era had honed tactical skills; and the influx of American weaponry had modernised equipment significantly.

However, the Afghan war had also introduced problematic elements into the military culture. The decade of supporting Islamist mujahideen had created institutional connections between elements of the army and ISI and Islamist militant networks that were difficult to disentangle. Some officers had developed ideological affinities with Islamist causes that extended beyond professional support for state policy.

The ISI's enormously expanded role during the Afghan war had given it institutional self-confidence and operational capability that made it increasingly difficult for civilian governments or even the army high command to fully control. The ISI's Pakistan operations — its domestic political activities, its management of militant groups, its commercial activities — operated with a degree of autonomy that represented a state within a state.

Urban Pakistan 1985–1995: Cities Under Pressure

Karachi, Lahore, and the Challenge of Rapid Urbanisation

Karachi: From Commercial Capital to Conflict Zone

Karachi's trajectory from 1985 to 1995 was one of the most dramatic urban disasters in Asia's recent history. The city had been Pakistan's commercial engine, generating approximately 70% of federal tax revenues and handling virtually all of the country's maritime trade. By the mid-1990s, it was also the site of what amounted to a low-intensity urban civil war between ethnic communities, political factions, and criminal networks.

The MQM's transformation from an ethnic political party to an organisation with a paramilitary wing that conducted targeted assassinations, controlled territory, and extorted businesses was the central political story of Karachi through this period. The government's response — ranging from accommodation to violent repression — failed to address the underlying grievances (land, jobs, political representation) that fuelled the MQM's support.

The economic cost of Karachi's disorder was enormous. Businesses relocated to other cities or countries. Foreign investment avoided the city. The port's efficiency declined as labour relations deteriorated. Professional emigration — doctors, engineers, teachers — depleted the human capital of what had been one of Asia's most dynamic cities. The Karachi crisis was in miniature the failure of Pakistani governance at its most consequential.

Lahore: Cultural Capital Amidst Political Turbulence

Lahore maintained its position as Pakistan's cultural and intellectual capital through the upheavals of this decade. The city's traditions of Urdu literature, classical music, progressive journalism, and legal advocacy persisted despite the pressures of Zia's Islamisation and subsequent political instability.

The Lahore Literary Festival — though not yet in the form it would later take — reflected an intellectual vitality that refused to be extinguished. The press, concentrated in Lahore, maintained a culture of editorial commentary and investigative journalism that the Zia era had constrained but not destroyed. The Lahore High Court Bar Association was a centre of institutional resistance to authoritarian governance.

Lahore's commercial economy benefited from Nawaz Sharif's political dominance of Punjab and the infrastructure investment — roads, bridges, the Lahore Ring Road — that the Chief Minister's government had funded. The city's industrial base in textiles, light engineering, and food processing continued to expand.

The Emergence of NGO Culture and Civil Society

One of the more positive developments of this decade was the growth of a vibrant civil society sector — non-governmental organisations working in health, education, women's rights, human rights, and community development. The Aga Khan Development Network, the Edhi Foundation, and dozens of smaller organisations were filling the gaps left by an inadequate state.

The Edhi Foundation, founded by Abdul Sattar Edhi, operated the world's largest volunteer ambulance network and provided orphanages, maternity homes, and welfare services across

Pakistan — funded entirely by public donations. Edhi himself was one of the most admired figures in Pakistani public life, a living rebuke to the corruption and incompetence of the political class.

International NGOs operating in Pakistan — initially attracted by the Afghan refugee crisis — had developed programmes across multiple sectors. Their presence brought international standards of accountability, gender sensitivity, and community participation that were gradually influencing Pakistani public sector practice. The NGO sector also provided employment and professional development for educated Pakistanis — particularly women — who found limited opportunities in the state bureaucracy.

Pakistani Culture, Literature and Arts 1985–1995

Creative Life Persists and Flourishes Despite Political Turbulence

The Return of Political Music: Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan

Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan, the incomparable qawwali master from Faisalabad, emerged in this decade as Pakistan's most internationally celebrated cultural figure. His recordings — combining the classical qawwali tradition of Sufi devotional music with an extraordinary vocal range and improvisational genius — reached audiences across South Asia, the Pakistani diaspora, and increasingly the global world music market.

Nusrat's international collaborations — with Peter Gabriel, Eddie Vedder, and on the soundtrack of 'The Last Temptation of Christ' — brought Pakistani music to audiences that would never otherwise have encountered it. In Pakistan itself, his status was almost mythological: he performed to packed audiences across the country, his recordings were omnipresent, and his particular genius — the ability to hold a note and build upon it for minutes, improvising variations that brought audiences to ecstasy — was recognised as something unique in the history of music.

Nusrat's qawwali was also a cultural statement: the Sufi devotional tradition he represented was exactly the Pakistani Islam that Zia's Wahhabisation had sought to suppress — syncretic, emotionally expressive, centred on the love of God and the saints rather than on legal observance and theological purity. His continued popularity was a form of cultural resistance to the reformulation of Pakistani identity.

Television Drama: The Golden Age Continues

Pakistani television drama continued to produce work of exceptional quality through this decade, maintaining the tradition of social realism that had flourished even under Zia's censorship. Writers like Haseena Moin, Bano Qudsia, and Farhat Ishtiaq created drama serials that addressed the realities of Pakistani urban and rural life with sensitivity and skill.

The drama serial 'Dhoop Kinare' — broadcast in 1987 — became one of the most beloved productions in Pakistani television history, its story of a hospital administrator and a doctor capturing the aspirations and tensions of Pakistan's educated middle class. 'Tanhaiyan', 'Ankahi', and 'Waris' similarly achieved iconic status.

The commercial expansion of television through this decade — more broadcast hours, regional language productions, and eventually the beginnings of satellite competition — both expanded the medium's reach and began to dilute the careful quality control of the earlier era. But Pakistani television drama's capacity to reflect social reality and generate national conversation remained a vital aspect of public culture.

Urdu Fiction and the Progressive Tradition

Pakistani Urdu fiction in this decade produced work of international quality that was insufficiently recognised outside the Urdu-speaking world. Writers like Intizar Husain — whose short stories and novels explored Partition's trauma, the nature of memory, and the Pakistani condition through a lens that was simultaneously local and universal — produced work that belonged in the canon of world literature.

The progressive literary tradition, temporarily suppressed under Zia, reasserted itself after 1988. Literary journals, mushairas (poetry gatherings), and book fairs created a vibrant if financially

precarious cultural economy. Lahore's Urdu literary culture — with its coffeehouses, literary societies, and tradition of passionate argument — maintained its vitality.

The relationship between Urdu literature and political commentary was intimate and productive. Pakistani poets and fiction writers addressed the political condition of their country — military rule, ethnic violence, economic inequality, religious extremism — in ways that the censors could not easily suppress without embarrassing themselves.

Looking Forward: What 1985–1995 Left for the Future

The Legacies and Unresolved Questions of a Turbulent Decade

The Nuclear Question: Pride, Peril, and the Coming Tests

By 1995, Pakistan's nuclear programme was an open secret — acknowledged by everyone, formally denied by Pakistan, and tolerated by a post-Cold War international community that lacked both the leverage and the will to force rollback. The programme had achieved what its architects intended: India could not contemplate military action against Pakistan without factoring in nuclear escalation risk.

Yet the nuclear posture also created new risks. Both India and Pakistan were nuclear-armed but had no agreed protocols for crisis management, no hotlines between their military commanders, and no shared understanding of the red lines that would trigger nuclear use. The doctrine of 'minimum credible deterrence' that Pakistan articulated was vague on specifics. In a crisis, the absence of communication channels and agreed procedures created the risk of miscalculation.

The 1998 nuclear tests — India's Pokhran II and Pakistan's Chagai — that lay just beyond this volume's scope were the inevitable culmination of fifteen years of the 'bomb in the basement' strategy. They would bring international sanctions, brief diplomatic crisis, and ultimately the normalisation of South Asian nuclear deterrence as an accepted strategic reality.

Afghanistan: The Coming Storm

As 1995 ended, the Taliban were in control of approximately one-third of Afghanistan and advancing. Their capture of Kabul in September 1996 would bring to power the most extreme government in modern history — one that banned music, expelled women from public life, destroyed ancient monuments, and provided sanctuary to Osama bin Laden's al-Qaeda. Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE would be the only countries to recognise the Taliban government.

Pakistan's culpability in the Taliban's rise was clear and its consequences would be severe. The jihadist infrastructure created for the anti-Soviet war had been redirected toward Afghanistan's civil war and Kashmir, creating networks of militants, weapons, and extremist ideology that would eventually turn on Pakistan itself. The Pakistani Taliban — Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan — that would emerge in the 2000s to conduct suicide bombings across Pakistan was the direct offspring of the policies of the 1980s and 1990s.

Democracy's Unfinished Business

The decade from 1985 to 1995 had demonstrated both Pakistan's democratic potential and the obstacles to its realisation. Pakistani voters, when given the opportunity, exercised their franchise with enthusiasm and sophistication. They had chosen Benazir Bhutto's PPP in 1988, Nawaz Sharif's PML-N in 1990 and again in 1993 (partially), and Benazir again in 1993. These choices reflected genuine political preferences and a desire for the kind of government that the electorate wanted.

But the system within which these choices were made — the Eighth Amendment, military autonomy, ISI political operations, presidential dismissal powers — was designed to prevent any elected government from actually governing in accordance with its electoral mandate. The result

was the cycle of dismissed governments, constitutional crises, and political instability that discredited civilian governance in the eyes of many Pakistanis.

The 1999 military coup — still in the future as this volume ends — would be presented by its architects as a response to civilian incompetence and corruption. In reality, it was the culmination of a decade in which the military had systematically undermined civilian institutions, denied elected governments the authority to govern, and then used the resulting dysfunction as justification for intervention. Pakistan's democratic journey from 1985 to 1995 was neither a failure of democracy nor a vindication of military rule — it was the story of democracy in an environment structured to prevent its success.

The Telecommunications Revolution Begins

The early 1990s brought the first stirrings of Pakistan's telecommunications revolution. Cellular telephone service was introduced in Pakistan in 1990 through Paktel and Mobilink, initially serving only a tiny wealthy elite who could afford the expensive handsets and call charges. By 1995, the cellular subscriber base remained small — fewer than 150,000 across the country — but the technology was established and the regulatory framework was being developed that would eventually enable mass adoption.

The liberalisation of telecommunications was one of the more successful economic reforms of this period. Breaking the state monopoly of Pakistan Telephone and Telegraph (PTT) and permitting private cellular operators introduced competition that would eventually reduce prices, expand coverage, and transform how Pakistanis communicated, conducted business, and accessed information. The groundwork laid in this decade would bear fruit in the 2000s when mobile penetration grew exponentially.

The Garment Industry and Pakistan's Export Economy

Pakistan's garment and textile industry was the backbone of the country's export economy through this decade, accounting for the majority of merchandise export earnings. The textile value chain — from cotton farming through ginning, spinning, weaving, and garment production — employed millions of workers and was the foundation of Pakistan's industrial base.

Pakistani textiles faced increasing competition from Bangladesh, Vietnam, and other low-cost producers through this period, while access to American and European markets was complicated by the Pressler Amendment sanctions and later by concerns about labour standards. The industry's response — moving up the value chain toward more finished garments and branded products — was hampered by inadequate skills development, infrastructure constraints, and the political instability that deterred long-term investment.

Women constituted a large proportion of the garment industry workforce, particularly in Karachi's export processing zones. Factory conditions were often poor, working hours long, and trade union rights limited. But the industry provided formal employment and income for women who had few other economic opportunities — a genuine if imperfect contribution to women's economic participation.

Pakistan's Diaspora: The Fifth Province

By 1995, the Pakistani diaspora — concentrated in the United Kingdom, United States, Canada, and the Gulf states — had grown to several million people and had become a significant force in both Pakistan's economy and its political culture. Remittances from the diaspora were Pakistan's second largest source of foreign exchange after textile exports, sustaining millions of families and financing house construction, education, and small businesses across rural Punjab, NWFP, and Azad Kashmir.

The diaspora's political influence was exercised through multiple channels: direct lobbying of Western governments on Pakistan's behalf, financial contributions to political parties (particularly the PPP and PML-N, which both maintained strong diaspora branches), and the transmission of political ideas and social norms back to Pakistan through visits, telecommunications, and returned migrants.

The UK Pakistani community in particular had developed a political voice through the Labour Party, with Pakistani-origin politicians beginning to win Westminster seats. Their advocacy for Pakistani causes — Kashmir, democratic governance, human rights — created a bridge between Pakistani political concerns and British parliamentary debate. This diaspora diplomacy would become increasingly significant in subsequent decades.

Conclusion: 1985–1995 — Democracy's Decade of Disappointment

The decade from 1985 to 1995 was one of lost opportunities for Pakistan. It began with the lifting of martial law and ended with Benazir Bhutto's second government struggling to survive. In between lay two elections, three dismissals of governments, one military mediation, a cricket World Cup victory, a nuclear programme that crossed the weapons threshold, and the emergence of the Taliban — Pakistan's most consequential foreign policy creation.

The democratic transition of 1988 was a genuine achievement — Pakistanis had voted freely and had chosen the daughter of the man a military dictator had hanged. But the system within which that democracy operated was designed to prevent genuine civilian governance. The Eighth Amendment, the military's institutional autonomy, the ISI's domestic political role, and the weakness of political institutions relative to the army all ensured that elected governments could govern but not rule.

The decade's economic record was mixed: growth was real but built on fragile foundations; privatisation created new elites rather than competitive markets; and the structural problems — low taxation, inadequate education, energy shortages, feudal land relations — were deferred rather than addressed. Pakistan in 1995 was richer in per capita terms than in 1985 but not significantly more developed institutionally, socially, or democratically.

The Afghan war's aftermath — Taliban rise, refugee crisis, weapons proliferation, drugs epidemic, militarised Islam — was the decade's darkest legacy. Pakistan had helped defeat the Soviet Union in Afghanistan, a genuine strategic achievement, but in doing so had planted seeds of violence that would flower in the following decade with catastrophic consequences for Pakistan itself. The story of how Pakistan became both a nuclear state and a host to international jihadism is the story of 1985–1995.

Appendix: Key Events Timeline 1985–1995

Date	Event
30 Dec 1985	Martial law lifted; Junejo continues as PM
10 Apr 1986	Benazir Bhutto returns to Pakistan; massive crowds in Lahore
14 Apr 1988	Geneva Accords signed — Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan agreed
10 Apr 1988	Ojhri Camp explosion — weapons depot destroys parts of Rawalpindi
29 May 1988	Zia dismisses Junejo under Art. 58(2)(b); dissolves National Assembly
17 Aug 1988	President Zia ul-Haq killed in C-130 air crash near Bahawalpur
16 Nov 1988	First free election since 1970; PPP wins 93 seats
1 Dec 1988	Benazir Bhutto sworn in — first female PM of a Muslim country
15 Feb 1989	Last Soviet troops leave Afghanistan
Oct 1989	Operation Midnight Jackal — coup plot against Benazir exposed
Nov 1989	No-confidence motion against Benazir defeated
9 Nov 1989	Berlin Wall falls; Cold War ending
2 Aug 1990	Iraq invades Kuwait; Pakistan sides with Saudi Arabia
6 Aug 1990	President GIK dismisses Benazir under Art. 58(2)(b)
Oct 1990	Pressler Amendment triggered — US aid to Pakistan cut off
Oct 1990	Elections — Nawaz Sharif's IJI wins; becomes PM
1991	Nawaz launches economic liberalisation; Yellow Cab Scheme
1991	Shariat Bill passes NA but blocked in Senate
Feb 1991	Gulf War — Pakistan troops deployed in Saudi Arabia (non-combat)
25 Dec 1991	Soviet Union dissolved; Cold War ends formally
Apr 1992	Kabul falls; Afghan civil war intensifies
25 Mar 1992	Pakistan wins Cricket World Cup final vs England in Melbourne
18 Apr 1993	GIK dismisses Nawaz Sharif under Art. 58(2)(b)
May 1993	Supreme Court restores Nawaz Sharif — unprecedented judicial ruling
Jul 1993	Army mediates: both GIK and Nawaz Sharif resign; caretakers installed
Oct 1993	Elections — PPP wins 86 seats; Benazir sworn in (2nd term)
6 Dec 1992	Babri Masjid demolished in India; riots in Pakistan
1993	Kashmir insurgency intensifies; ISI supports militant groups
1993	Farooq Leghari elected President — PPP loyalist
Oct 1994	Taliban capture Kandahar; Pakistani ISI provides support
Dec 1994	Shaukat Khanum Cancer Hospital inaugurated by Imran Khan
1994	Karachi urban war — MQM vs state; ethnic violence peaks

Date	Event
1994	Pakistan's fiscal deficit: ~8% of GDP; IMF structural adjustment pressures
Jun 1995	Army operation launched in Karachi against MQM strongholds
1995	Sectarian terrorism — SSP, LeJ, Sipah-e-Muhammad killings escalate
1995	Taliban advance across Afghanistan; Pakistan provides logistical support
Nov 1995	Egyptian Embassy bombing in Islamabad — international jihadists active
1995	Brown Amendment — US releases some previously withheld military equipment
1995	PTI (Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf) founded by Imran Khan

Appendix: Heads of State & Government 1985–1995

Name	Role	Period
Gen. Zia ul-Haq	President / CMLA	Jul 1977 – Aug 1988
Ghulam Ishaq Khan	Acting then elected President	Aug 1988 – Jul 1993
Wasim Sajjad	Acting President	Jul–Nov 1993
Farooq Leghari	President	Nov 1993 – Dec 1997
Muhammad Khan Junejo	Prime Minister	Mar 1985 – May 1988
Benazir Bhutto	Prime Minister (1st term)	Dec 1988 – Aug 1990
Ghulam Mustafa Jatoi	Caretaker Prime Minister	Aug–Oct 1990
Nawaz Sharif	Prime Minister (1st term)	Nov 1990 – Apr 1993
Balkh Sher Mazari	Caretaker Prime Minister	Apr–May 1993
Nawaz Sharif	Restored by SC then resigned	May–Jul 1993
Moeen Qureshi	Caretaker Prime Minister	Jul–Oct 1993
Benazir Bhutto	Prime Minister (2nd term)	Oct 1993 – Nov 1996

■ Pakistan Zindabad ■

Long Live Pakistan

HISTORY OF PAKISTAN

A Comprehensive Year-by-Year Account

1995 – 2005

From the Taliban's Rise to 9/11, Musharraf's Rule, and the War on Terror

Covering: Politics • Governance • Economy • Military • Society • Foreign Relations

Volume V of the Pakistan History Series. Continues directly from the 1947–1995 volume. Page numbering is preserved across all volumes.

Foreword: A Decade of Nuclear Tests, Coups, and Global War

The decade from 1995 to 2005 was, without question, the most globally consequential in Pakistan's history. No other ten years produced events of such seismic international importance: the nuclear tests of 1998 that formally announced South Asia's entry into the nuclear club; the Kargil War of 1999, the world's first armed conflict between two nuclear powers; the military coup of October 1999 that ended the democratic experiment for a decade; and the September 11, 2001 attacks that transformed Pakistan overnight from a state under international sanctions into America's most critical frontline ally in a new global war.

These events were not simply external developments that happened to Pakistan. Pakistan was an active — sometimes the central — protagonist. The nuclear tests were the culmination of a thirty-year programme driven by Pakistani scientific genius and political will. The Kargil adventure was a Pakistani military operation that brought the subcontinent to the brink of nuclear war. The Taliban who sheltered Osama bin Laden and made September 11 possible had been armed, trained, and supported by Pakistan's own intelligence services. And General Pervez Musharraf — who had ordered Kargil and seized power in a coup — became, improbably, America's essential partner in the War on Terror.

At home, this decade saw the completion of the democratic cycle's destruction: Nawaz Sharif's second government dismissed in 1997, then his coup attempt against Musharraf in 1999 backfired catastrophically; Benazir Bhutto in exile in London and Dubai; both leaders convicted of corruption in absentia. Pakistan's politics were managed by a soldier who had more political skill than most civilians and less democratic legitimacy than any.

This volume covers those ten years with the detail and depth they demand — recording the choices made, the opportunities missed, and the consequences, many of which Pakistan continues to live with two decades later.

1996 Benazir Dismissed Again; Taliban Take Kabul; Murtaza Bhutto Killed

A Year of Catastrophes Personal and National

The Dismissal of Benazir Bhutto: 5 November 1996

On 5 November 1996, President Farooq Leghari — a PPP loyalist whom Benazir herself had placed in the presidency — used Article 58(2)(b) to dismiss her government for the second time. The charges: corruption, nepotism, extra-judicial killings in Karachi by police under government direction, and the murder of her own brother Murtaza Bhutto.

The dismissal had been building for months as Leghari became increasingly estranged from Benazir over what he regarded as her government's brazen corruption and her failure to address his concerns. Asif Ali Zardari's activities as investment minister — extracting commissions from contracts, interfering in judicial appointments — had become a national scandal. International creditors were losing confidence. The military, again, was tacitly supportive of the President's action.

The dismissal was Benazir's second in six years, making her the first politician in Pakistani history to be dismissed by presidential order twice. It ended her second government after barely three years — again short of a full term. Miraj Khalid was appointed caretaker Prime Minister and fresh elections announced for February 1997.

The Killing of Murtaza Bhutto: September 1996

On 20 September 1996, Murtaza Bhutto — Benazir's younger brother and founder of the Al-Zulfikar militant organisation — was shot dead by police outside his home in Karachi's Clifton neighbourhood in what he and his supporters had always regarded as a politically motivated encounter. Murtaza had returned to Pakistan in 1993 after years in exile, had won a provincial assembly seat, and had been a persistent critic of his sister's government and particularly of Asif Zardari.

The circumstances of Murtaza's killing were deeply suspicious. He was shot along with several of his supporters in what police described as a gunfight, but witnesses disputed this account. The political implications were devastating: President Leghari cited Murtaza's killing as evidence of the government's complicity in extrajudicial violence — implying that Benazir's own government had killed her own brother.

Murtaza's widow Ghinwa and his daughter Fatima became persistent critics of Benazir, accusing her and Zardari of responsibility for his death. The killing remained uninvestigated and unpunished, adding another layer of tragedy to the Bhutto family's already blood-soaked history.

The Taliban Take Kabul: September 1996

On 27 September 1996, Taliban forces captured Kabul, completing their extraordinary military conquest of most of Afghanistan. Their first act on entering the city was to drag former President Najibullah from the UN compound where he had taken refuge in 1992, torture him, and hang him from a traffic post — a public display of brutality that announced the nature of the new regime.

The Taliban government of Mullah Mohammad Omar established in Kabul was unlike anything in modern political history. Music was banned; women were prohibited from working, studying, or

leaving home unaccompanied; men were required to grow beards of specified length; television, cinema, and most forms of recreation were outlawed; and a religious police force enforced these edicts with public beatings. The UN, international NGOs, and most foreign governments condemned the regime.

Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE were the only countries to formally recognise the Taliban government. Pakistan's ISI had been central to the Taliban's rise and continued to provide support. The strategic logic remained the same: a Taliban Afghanistan provided strategic depth against India and a friendly government on Pakistan's western border. The international isolation this recognition brought was accepted as the price of strategic advantage.

1997 Nawaz Sharif's Landslide; Thirteenth Amendment; Constitutional Confrontation

The PML-N's Massive Majority Proves Both Strength and Weakness

The February 1997 Elections: Nawaz's Landslide

The general election of 3 February 1997 produced the most lopsided result in Pakistan's electoral history. Nawaz Sharif's Pakistan Muslim League-N won 137 of 207 National Assembly seats — a two-thirds majority that gave it the power to amend the constitution without coalition partners. The PPP won only 18 seats, its worst ever national result, devastated by the corruption scandals of Benazir's second government and voter exhaustion with the political cycle.

The scale of the victory gave Nawaz Sharif a mandate he had never previously enjoyed. For the first time, he had the parliamentary numbers to change the constitutional rules that had been used against him. His first priority was removing the Eighth Amendment's most dangerous provision.

The Thirteenth Amendment: Removing the Presidential Sword

In April 1997, Nawaz Sharif used his parliamentary supermajority to pass the Thirteenth Amendment to the constitution, removing Article 58(2)(b) — the presidential power to dissolve the National Assembly at discretion that had been used to dismiss four governments since 1988. The amendment restored a genuinely parliamentary system in which the Prime Minister's tenure depended on parliamentary confidence rather than presidential favour.

The Thirteenth Amendment was constitutionally sound and democratically correct — Article 58(2)(b) was an anti-democratic provision that had done enormous damage to Pakistan's political development. But its removal also eliminated the constitutional safety valve that presidents had used when governments became dysfunctional. Without the dismissal power, the only way to remove an elected government was through a vote of no-confidence — or a military coup.

Nawaz followed the Thirteenth Amendment with the Fourteenth Amendment, which prohibited floor-crossing — members of parliament defecting from their party. This provision, while addressing a genuine problem, also concentrated power in party leaders (specifically in Nawaz himself) at the expense of parliamentary independence.

Confrontation with the Judiciary and the Chief Justice Crisis

Nawaz Sharif's second government was marked by escalating confrontations with institutions that challenged his authority. The most dramatic was the assault on the Supreme Court: in November 1997, a mob of PML-N supporters stormed the Supreme Court building in Islamabad while the court was in session, roughing up lawyers and causing chaos. Chief Justice Sajjad Ali Shah — who had been in dispute with Nawaz Sharif's government over contempt proceedings — was ultimately removed through a manipulated process involving rival Supreme Court judges.

The attack on the Supreme Court was one of the most egregious assaults on judicial independence in Pakistani history. It demonstrated that even a government with a two-thirds parliamentary majority was willing to use mob violence against the country's highest court. The message was clear: Nawaz Sharif would not tolerate institutional constraints on his authority.

Economic Policy: Privatisation and the IMF

Nawaz Sharif's economic team, led by Finance Minister Sartaj Aziz, pursued orthodox economic policies — privatisation, fiscal consolidation, and engagement with the IMF — while also pursuing populist projects. The motorway programme expanded: the M2 Lahore-Islamabad motorway was inaugurated in 1997, a genuine infrastructure achievement that transformed travel between Pakistan's two largest cities.

The fiscal situation, however, was increasingly precarious. Debt servicing consumed a growing share of government revenue. Foreign exchange reserves were dangerously low. The rupee was under pressure. Pakistan was dependent on IMF programmes for balance of payments support — support that came with conditions (tax reform, subsidy reduction, privatisation targets) that successive governments met partially at best.

1998 Nuclear Tests: Pakistan Becomes the World's Seventh Nuclear Power

Chagai Changes Everything — For Pakistan and for South Asia

India's Pokhran II Tests: May 1998

On 11 and 13 May 1998, India conducted five nuclear tests at the Pokhran test range in Rajasthan — codenamed Operation Shakti — openly declaring itself a nuclear weapons state for the first time. The tests were ordered by the BJP government of Atal Bihari Vajpayee, who had come to power in March 1998. The BJP's Hindu nationalist ideology had long advocated an overt nuclear posture, and the tests fulfilled a campaign commitment.

The world reacted with alarm. The United States, Japan, and other countries imposed sanctions on India. The UN Security Council called for restraint. But the strongest pressure was directed at Pakistan: President Clinton telephoned Nawaz Sharif personally to urge Pakistan not to respond with its own tests, promising economic incentives and diplomatic support on Kashmir if Pakistan showed restraint.

The pressure on Pakistan was intense and came from multiple directions. Nawaz Sharif and his advisers were divided: some argued that Pakistan should show strategic restraint, accepting that its existing undeclared deterrent was sufficient and using the moment to extract maximum international concessions. Others — led by the military and the scientific establishment — argued that Pakistan had no choice but to demonstrate its deterrent capability openly.

28 May 1998: Chagai — Pakistan Tests Five Nuclear Devices

On 28 May 1998, Pakistan conducted five simultaneous nuclear tests at the Chagai hills in Balochistan — codenamed Chagai-I. Two days later, on 30 May, a sixth test was conducted at the Kharan desert — Chagai-II. The tests were announced on Pakistani state television by Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif in a nationally broadcast address that was met with jubilation across the country.

The popular reaction in Pakistan was one of overwhelming pride and celebration. Pakistanis poured into the streets in cities and towns across the country, distributing sweets and hoisting national flags. The tests confirmed what most Pakistanis had believed for years: their country had the bomb. The nuclear scientist A.Q. Khan was treated as a national hero, receiving the highest civilian honour.

The tests imposed immediate and severe economic consequences. The United States, European Union, Japan, and other countries imposed comprehensive sanctions on Pakistan — cutting off economic aid, blocking IMF and World Bank lending, and freezing military assistance. Pakistan's foreign exchange reserves, already critically low, plummeted. The government froze foreign currency accounts held by Pakistani citizens — a controversial measure that destroyed confidence in the banking system.

Yet Nawaz Sharif's political calculation was that the domestic political cost of not testing — in a country where the nuclear programme was the most popular government project — would have been greater than the international cost of testing. He was probably right. The tests gave him a brief surge of popularity that temporarily overshadowed the government's other difficulties.

"We have settled a score and have carried out five nuclear tests today. Pakistan has become a nuclear power."

— Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, addressing the nation, 28 May 1998

The Economic Fallout: Sanctions and Financial Crisis

The post-test sanctions hit Pakistan at a moment of already severe economic vulnerability. Foreign exchange reserves fell to below $400 million — less than three weeks of import cover. The government's decision to freeze foreign currency accounts — essentially preventing depositors from withdrawing their own dollar savings — was a desperate measure that provided temporary relief but permanently damaged confidence in Pakistani financial institutions.

Saudi Arabia provided some emergency financial assistance — approximately $1.4 billion in deferred oil payments — that helped Pakistan avoid an immediate balance of payments crisis. China also provided support. But the IMF programme was suspended and access to international capital markets was effectively cut off. Pakistan was in the most severe economic crisis since the 1971 separation.

The long-term economic damage of the nuclear tests — in terms of foregone investment, disrupted trade, and sanctions-related costs — was substantial. Pakistan's per capita income growth slowed significantly in 1998-99. The manufacturing sector contracted. Unemployment rose. The poor, who had celebrated the tests with genuine enthusiasm, bore the heaviest burden of the economic consequences.

1999 Kargil War; Nawaz Dismissed; Musharraf's Coup

The Most Consequential Year in Pakistan Since 1971

The Kargil Operation: Pakistan's Most Reckless Gamble

In the late winter and early spring of 1999, while peace talks between India and Pakistan were ongoing — Prime Minister Vajpayee had made a historic bus journey to Lahore in February 1999 and signed the Lahore Declaration committing both countries to peace — the Pakistan Army was secretly sending troops and militants across the Line of Control in Kashmir to occupy Indian positions in the Kargil sector.

The Kargil operation — planned and executed by General Pervez Musharraf, COAS, with General Mohammad Aziz and other senior officers, and apparently without the full knowledge of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif — involved Pakistani regular soldiers and Northern Light Infantry troops disguised as mujahideen occupying strategic heights on the Indian side of the LoC. The positions, once captured, could threaten the Srinagar-Leh highway that was India's only land link to the Ladakh region.

When Indian forces discovered the incursion in May 1999, the resulting conflict became the highest-altitude war ever fought. Indian artillery and air strikes were used against the Pakistani positions; Pakistani forces suffered heavy casualties in terrain that favoured defenders. The world watched with alarm as two nuclear-armed countries fought a limited but intense war in the Himalayas.

The Kargil Withdrawal: American Pressure and Pakistani Retreat

As the military situation deteriorated — Indian forces were recapturing some positions and the economic sanctions were biting — Nawaz Sharif flew to Washington on 4 July 1999 to meet President Clinton. In a tense meeting at Blair House, Clinton made clear that the United States would not support Pakistan and demanded immediate withdrawal. The implications — including the possibility of IMF assistance being blocked and a deteriorating military position — left Nawaz with little choice.

The withdrawal agreement was presented in Pakistan as a diplomatic achievement; in reality it was a humiliation. Pakistani forces had to withdraw from positions they had occupied at the cost of hundreds of lives, without having achieved any of the operation's objectives. India had not been forced to negotiate on Kashmir; the Srinagar-Leh highway had not been cut; and international opinion had moved decisively against Pakistan for initiating a conflict across the LoC.

The Kargil operation had multiple catastrophic consequences: it destroyed the Lahore peace process, it deepened international suspicions of Pakistan's reliability as a state actor, it led directly to the military coup of October 1999, and it demonstrated that the Pakistani military could initiate a war without civilian authorisation. The full extent of Nawaz Sharif's prior knowledge of the operation remains disputed.

12 October 1999: General Musharraf's Coup

As relations between Nawaz Sharif and General Musharraf deteriorated in the wake of Kargil — Nawaz blamed Musharraf for the disaster; Musharraf believed Nawaz had undermined the military

by agreeing to withdraw — events came to a head dramatically on 12 October 1999. Nawaz Sharif attempted to remove Musharraf as Army Chief while the general was aboard a Pakistan International Airlines flight returning from Sri Lanka, appointing a loyalist general in his place and ordering Karachi airport not to let Musharraf's plane land.

The military's response was swift and overwhelming. Corps commanders loyal to Musharraf seized power in Islamabad, Lahore, Karachi, and other cities within hours. Nawaz Sharif was arrested at the Prime Minister's House. Musharraf's plane was diverted but eventually landed in Karachi. By the morning of 13 October, the military was in complete control of the country. It was Pakistan's fourth military coup.

Musharraf suspended the constitution, dissolved the National Assembly and provincial assemblies, declared a state of emergency, and announced himself Chief Executive — pointedly avoiding the title President that Zia had used. He promised accountability of corrupt politicians, economic reform, and eventually a return to democracy. Like Zia before him, he promised an early return to elections. Like Zia, he would not keep that promise for years.

"The armed forces could not remain mere spectators of the democratic process being systematically abused to serve personal ends."

— General Pervez Musharraf, justifying his coup, 13 October 1999

Pakistan in 1999: Key Statistics

Kargil War: May–July 1999 (Pakistan's casualties: est. 400-4,000) | Coup date: 12 October 1999 | Nawaz Sharif: arrested, tried, sentenced to life imprisonment | Foreign exchange reserves: critically low post-sanctions | GDP growth: ~3.7% (declining) | Afghan refugees still in Pakistan: ~1.2 million

2000 Musharraf Consolidates; Nawaz Exiled; Economic Reform Begins

Pakistan Under Military Rule Again — But Different This Time

Musharraf's Early Governance: The Accountability Drive

Musharraf moved quickly to establish his government's credentials through an accountability drive. The National Accountability Bureau (NAB) was established with sweeping powers to investigate corruption, recover public money, and prosecute offenders. Politicians from both the PPP and PML-N were targeted; business figures with political connections were arrested; and high-profile cases were prosecuted with considerable publicity.

The accountability drive had real elements — Pakistan's political class had genuinely looted public resources on a massive scale, and some of the cases were legitimate. But it was also selectively applied: politicians who were willing to cooperate with Musharraf's political project were treated more leniently than those who resisted. The NAB became both a genuine anti-corruption instrument and a tool of political management.

Nawaz Sharif was tried by an anti-terrorism court — a jurisdiction whose applicability to his offences was questionable — and convicted in April 2000. He was sentenced to life imprisonment on charges of hijacking (for attempting to divert Musharraf's plane) and terrorism. The conviction was later commuted: Nawaz was exiled to Saudi Arabia in a deal that exchanged his freedom for a commitment to remain outside Pakistan for ten years.

The Supreme Court Validates the Coup

In May 2000, the Supreme Court of Pakistan — in the case of Zafar Ali Shah vs. Pervez Musharraf — validated the military coup under the 'doctrine of necessity', the same legal theory used to validate Ayub Khan's and Zia's coups. The court gave Musharraf three years to hold elections and return to constitutional governance.

The Supreme Court's validation of the coup followed a pattern deeply embedded in Pakistani judicial history: the courts finding legal justification for military interventions after the fact, using the doctrine that extra-constitutional actions are permissible when the state faces necessity. The court's willingness to validate Musharraf's coup — while imposing a time limit — was both an act of institutional accommodation and a limitation on military authority.

Local Government Reform: Devolution of Power

Musharraf's most significant governance reform was the devolution of power to local governments through the Local Government Ordinance of 2001. The Devolution Plan created a new tier of elected local government — district governments, tehsil councils, and union councils — with significant administrative and financial powers transferred from provincial governments.

The reform was conceptually sound: Pakistan's governance had been chronically over-centralised at the provincial level, and bringing government closer to citizens had obvious merit. In practice, however, the devolution was implemented in ways that strengthened Musharraf's political position rather than genuinely empowering communities. The new district Nazims (mayors) were elected on a non-party basis and owed their positions to Musharraf's political support, creating a new layer of government-dependent local bosses.

Economic Management: The Shaukat Aziz Era Begins

Musharraf appointed Shaukat Aziz — a former Citibank executive with international financial experience — as Finance Minister. Aziz brought a technocratic professionalism to economic management that had been absent under the politically driven economic policies of the Benazir and Nawaz governments. He negotiated an IMF programme, restructured Pakistan's foreign debt (securing Paris Club relief), and implemented tax and tariff reforms.

The initial economic results were positive: growth recovered, inflation was brought under control, and foreign exchange reserves began to rebuild. The privatisation programme was relaunched, with PTCL (Pakistan Telecommunication Corporation) and other state enterprises sold to private investors. Banking sector reform — improving regulation and reducing non-performing loans — improved the financial system's health.

2001 September 11 Changes Everything; Pakistan Joins the War on Terror

The Most Consequential Foreign Policy Decision in Pakistan's History

11 September 2001: The World Changes

The terrorist attacks on the United States on 11 September 2001 — in which al-Qaeda operatives hijacked four commercial aircraft, flying two into the World Trade Center in New York, one into the Pentagon in Washington, and crashing a fourth in Pennsylvania — killed approximately 3,000 people and fundamentally altered the global political environment.

For Pakistan, the attacks were simultaneously a crisis and an opportunity. The crisis: al-Qaeda had planned the attacks from Afghanistan, where the Taliban — Pakistan's clients — were providing sanctuary to Osama bin Laden. Pakistan was therefore intimately associated, in American eyes, with the regime that had enabled the worst terrorist attack in American history. The opportunity: Pakistan's geographic position — the only country bordering Afghanistan from the south and east with the infrastructure to support a military campaign — made it indispensable to any American military response.

US Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage delivered an ultimatum to ISI Director Lieutenant General Mahmood Ahmed within days of the attacks: Pakistan must cooperate fully with the United States or face being 'bombed back to the stone age'. Musharraf has described this conversation in his memoirs. Whether or not those exact words were used, the message was clear.

Musharraf's Fateful Decision: Joining the Coalition

Musharraf made the decision to join the American-led coalition against al-Qaeda and the Taliban in a matter of days, with minimal consultation. He went on national television to explain his decision to a Pakistani public that was deeply divided: sympathetic to the Taliban, suspicious of American motives, and aware that Pakistan's support would mean abandoning its long-standing Afghan policy.

Musharraf's justification was pragmatic: Pakistan faced a choice between enormous risks on both sides, and siding with the United States offered more benefits than refusal. The benefits were quickly apparent: American sanctions were lifted; $600 million in economic assistance was immediately approved; debt rescheduling worth over $1 billion was arranged; and Pakistan was welcomed back into the international community after years of post-coup isolation.

The costs were equally real and began to manifest almost immediately. Pakistan's own Taliban and jihadist networks — built over twenty years of Afghan policy — were now in direct conflict with Pakistani state interests. The Balochistan and FATA (Federally Administered Tribal Areas) border regions, through which most infiltration into Afghanistan had occurred, would become fronts in a conflict that Pakistani society had not been prepared for and did not fully support.

Operation Enduring Freedom: American Forces in Afghanistan

The American-led military campaign in Afghanistan began on 7 October 2001. Within weeks, the Taliban government collapsed under air strikes and the advance of the Northern Alliance, which American special forces and CIA officers guided and supported. Kabul fell on 13 November; Kandahar, the Taliban's heartland, fell on 7 December. The Taliban leadership, including Mullah

Omar, melted into the Pakistani tribal areas along the Durand Line.

Pakistan provided crucial logistical support for Operation Enduring Freedom: air bases at Jacobabad, Pasni, Shamsi, and Dalbandin were made available to American forces; Pakistani airspace was opened; and the ISI shared intelligence on Taliban and al-Qaeda networks. Pakistan also cooperated in capturing hundreds of al-Qaeda and Taliban figures, handing them to American custody — some to the Guantanamo Bay detention facility.

The Taliban's retreat into Pakistan's tribal areas — particularly the FATA and Balochistan — created an immediate strategic dilemma for Pakistan. The ISI had long-standing relationships with Taliban commanders who were now technically enemies. Pakistani Pashtun tribes on both sides of the Durand Line had family and clan connections to the Afghan Taliban. The border was porous, mountainous, and practically uncontrollable.

Musharraf Bans Militant Organisations: January 2002

Under intense American pressure, Musharraf banned five militant organisations in January 2002: Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM), Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan (SSP), Tehrik-e-Jafaria Pakistan (TJP), and Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ). The bans were a significant policy shift — acknowledging that these organisations posed a threat — but their implementation was incomplete.

LeT and JeM, which had been primary instruments of Pakistan's Kashmir policy, simply renamed themselves: LeT became Jamaat-ud-Dawa; JeM continued to operate under various names. Their leadership was briefly detained but not prosecuted, their infrastructure remained intact, and their fundraising continued through religious networks. The bans were real in the sense that the organisations lost formal state support; they were incomplete in the sense that the organisations themselves were not dismantled.

2002 Constitutional Amendments, the LFO, and Manipulated Elections

Musharraf Seeks Civilian Legitimacy on His Own Terms

The April 2002 Referendum

In April 2002, Musharraf held a referendum asking voters whether they supported his continuation as President for a further five years. The opposition boycotted; the official turnout of 70% and approval rate of 98% were widely disbelieved. Pakistani journalists reported near-empty polling stations; domestic and international observers documented extensive irregularities.

The referendum was an almost exact replay of Zia's 1984 referendum — the same constitutional device, the same manipulated results, the same opposition boycott, and the same international scepticism. Musharraf used the result to claim a presidential mandate that extended beyond the October 2002 general elections, giving him a democratic veneer to present to Western partners increasingly concerned about Pakistani governance.

The Legal Framework Order: Constitutionalising Military Rule

In August 2002, Musharraf issued the Legal Framework Order (LFO) — a sweeping set of constitutional amendments that he promulgated by presidential decree without parliamentary approval. The LFO reinstated Article 58(2)(b) (the presidential power to dismiss governments), created the National Security Council (giving the military institutional status in civilian governance), validated all Musharraf's actions since the coup, and allowed him to retain the position of Army Chief of Staff simultaneously with the presidency.

The LFO was constitutionally questionable — amending the constitution by presidential decree rather than parliamentary supermajority violated the amendment procedure. But Musharraf calculated that the elections would produce an assembly that would eventually ratify the LFO, and that international partners would not make an issue of the procedure given their dependence on Pakistan for the War on Terror.

The October 2002 Elections: Engineering a Hung Parliament

General elections held on 10 October 2002 produced a deliberately fragmented result — the product of pre-election engineering by the intelligence services. The PML-Q (Pakistan Muslim League-Quaid, a pro-Musharraf splinter from Nawaz Sharif's PML-N) won the largest number of seats but not a majority. The PPP's electoral alliance (PPP-P) won the second largest share. The Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA) — an alliance of six religious parties — made unprecedented gains, winning 60 seats and forming the government in NWFP.

The MMA's extraordinary success — they had never previously won more than a handful of seats nationally — was widely attributed to multiple factors: the emotional atmosphere post-September 11 and the US military campaign in Afghanistan, which had generated genuine public sympathy for Afghan Muslims; the disqualification of candidates from the PPP and PML-N on educational qualification grounds that conveniently targeted opposition politicians; and ISI assistance in marginalising secular parties.

Zafarullah Khan Jamali of the PML-Q was eventually elected Prime Minister in November 2002 with the MMA's support — a coalition between pro-military secular politicians and Islamist parties that

suited Musharraf's purposes of maintaining a government dependent on his backing.

2003 Seventeenth Amendment; India-Pakistan Ceasefire; Economic Recovery

Musharraf Formalises His Dual Role as Army Chief and President

The Seventeenth Amendment: Parliament Endorses Military Rule

In December 2003, the National Assembly and Senate passed the Seventeenth Amendment to the constitution, incorporating Musharraf's LFO changes into the formal constitutional text. The amendment was passed with MMA support — the religious parties extracting a promise from Musharraf to give up the dual role of Army Chief and President by December 2004 (a promise he would break, retaining both positions until 2007).

The Seventeenth Amendment gave constitutional legitimacy to the arrangements Musharraf had imposed by decree. It restored Article 58(2)(b), entrenched the National Security Council, and validated the coup itself. Pakistan's democratic parties — the PPP and PML-N, both boycotting from outside the assembly — condemned the amendment as the institutionalisation of military rule through civilian instruments.

The MMA's willingness to provide the parliamentary majority needed for the Seventeenth Amendment in exchange for the dual-role promise illustrated the religious parties' political opportunism: they presented themselves as champions of Islamic governance and opponents of American influence while providing the parliamentary cover that kept a military dictator in power.

India-Pakistan Ceasefire and Peace Process

A ceasefire along the Line of Control in Kashmir was announced in November 2003, ending years of almost daily exchanges of artillery and small arms fire that had claimed hundreds of lives. The ceasefire was significant: it reduced the immediate military tension in Kashmir and created space for a more serious diplomatic dialogue.

The composite dialogue process between India and Pakistan was relaunched in January 2004 with a meeting between Prime Ministers Vajpayee and Musharraf in Islamabad. Musharraf made a significant commitment: Pakistan would not permit its territory to be used for terrorism against India — an implicit acknowledgment that it had previously done so. In return, India agreed to restart the comprehensive dialogue on all bilateral issues including Kashmir.

The détente with India was one of the most positive developments of the Musharraf era. It reflected a pragmatic realism: continuing to support the Kashmir insurgency was costing Pakistan more than it was gaining, and the post-September 11 environment had made international support for Pakistan's Kashmir policy increasingly difficult to maintain.

Economic Recovery: The Growth Years Begin

By 2003, Pakistan's economy was recovering strongly from the combination of nuclear test sanctions and September 11 disruption. American aid — which had resumed massively after September 11 — was providing budgetary support that freed government resources for development. Remittances from overseas Pakistanis were growing rapidly, particularly after September 11 made wire transfers through official channels more attractive (informal hawala transfers became more risky).

GDP growth recovered to over 5% and was accelerating. The banking sector, substantially reformed, was extending credit more readily. The construction sector was booming. The IT and telecommunications industries were growing rapidly as mobile phone penetration expanded dramatically following the auctioning of new mobile licences in 2003-04.

2004 A.Q. Khan Confesses; Army Operations in FATA; Shaukat Aziz PM

The Nuclear Proliferation Scandal Rocks Pakistan's Strategic Foundations

The A.Q. Khan Proliferation Network Exposed

In February 2004, A.Q. Khan appeared on Pakistani television in a staged confession, admitting that he had transferred nuclear weapons technology — centrifuge designs, components, and in some cases complete weapon designs — to Libya, Iran, and North Korea. He claimed full personal responsibility, absolving the Pakistani government and military of any knowledge.

The confession was almost certainly scripted and the claim of government ignorance almost certainly false. American intelligence assessments documented that the ISI was aware of at least some of Khan's activities and that senior government officials could not have been unaware of a proliferation network of such scale operating out of a government nuclear facility. The Pakistani government's insistence that Khan acted alone was a politically necessary fiction that American officials accepted because exposing the full truth would have destroyed the US-Pakistan partnership that was essential to the War on Terror.

Musharraf pardoned Khan immediately after his confession — another constitutionally questionable act — and placed him under house arrest in Islamabad. Khan remained a popular hero in Pakistan, his reputation as the 'father of the Islamic bomb' insulating him from public criticism. The international community accepted the Pakistani position with evident scepticism but without the consequences that a full reckoning would have required.

Military Operations in FATA: South Waziristan

Through 2004, the Pakistan Army conducted its first major military operations in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) — the semi-autonomous tribal belt along the Afghan border that had never previously seen a significant military deployment. American pressure — and evidence that al-Qaeda and Taliban commanders were operating from FATA — prompted Musharraf to order the army into South Waziristan.

The operations were tactically difficult and strategically problematic. The Pakistan Army had no doctrine, training, or equipment optimised for counter-insurgency in the tribal areas. The Waziri and Mehsud tribes who dominated South Waziristan had a centuries-long tradition of resistance to outside authority. Pakistani soldiers — many from Punjab with no cultural connection to the Pashtun tribal areas — were fighting in terrain and against opponents they were not prepared for.

The operations produced significant casualties on both sides and generated a backlash among FATA's Pashtun population that would fuel the Pakistani Taliban insurgency of subsequent years. Several agreements were negotiated with local militants — the Shakai Agreement and others — that gave the army temporary relief but allowed militant networks to regroup. American officials were frustrated by what they saw as Pakistani half-measures.

Shaukat Aziz Becomes Prime Minister

In August 2004, Shaukat Aziz was elected Prime Minister after engineering his election to the National Assembly from two constituencies. His appointment as PM consolidated the technocratic economic management approach that had been his hallmark as Finance Minister. Under Aziz,

Pakistan's economy performed well by most conventional measures: GDP growth reached 7-8%, inflation was moderate, foreign exchange reserves were rebuilt, and the stock market boomed.

The economic growth of the Musharraf-Aziz years was real but also reflected structural vulnerabilities. Growth was driven partly by consumption rather than investment, by American aid rather than productivity improvement, and by the construction boom rather than manufacturing. The fundamental weaknesses — low tax collection, energy shortages, inadequate education and health — were not addressed.

2005 The Kashmir Earthquake; Rise of the Pakistani Taliban; London Bombings

Natural Disaster and Terrorism Define a Year of Crisis

8 October 2005: The Kashmir Earthquake

On 8 October 2005, a magnitude 7.6 earthquake struck the mountainous region of Azad Kashmir and the North-West Frontier Province, in one of the deadliest natural disasters in South Asian history. The death toll was catastrophic: approximately 73,000 people killed, over 128,000 injured, and 3.5 million left homeless as the Himalayan winter approached.

Entire villages were obliterated. The historic city of Muzaffarabad, capital of Azad Kashmir, was devastated. Schools collapsed during class hours, killing thousands of children. The remote mountainous terrain made rescue and relief operations extraordinarily difficult — helicopters were essential but in limited supply.

The government's initial response was slow and inadequate. Musharraf's government eventually mobilised significant resources — army engineering units, the air force helicopter fleet, and coordination of international aid — and the international response was generous, with funds and teams arriving from across the world. But the scale of the disaster overwhelmed Pakistan's governance capacity. Tens of thousands of survivors spent the harsh mountain winter in inadequate shelters.

The earthquake had significant political consequences. It demonstrated the chronic weakness of Pakistani state capacity in crisis management. It also provided unexpected opportunities: India and Pakistan opened the Srinagar-Muzaffarabad bus route to allow divided Kashmiri families to communicate and help each other — a small humanitarian opening that briefly improved the bilateral atmosphere.

The London Bombings and Pakistani Connections: July 2005

The coordinated suicide bombings on London's public transport system on 7 July 2005 — which killed 52 people and injured over 700 — had a profound impact on Pakistan's international standing. Three of the four bombers were British citizens of Pakistani origin; the fourth was a Jamaican-born convert. Investigations revealed that at least some of the bombers had visited Pakistan and had connections to Pakistani militant organisations.

The London bombings crystallised a concern that had been building in Western intelligence agencies: that Pakistan's soil and its diaspora communities were serving as incubators for a new generation of globally oriented jihadist terrorists. The bombers were not Afghan war veterans or foreign fighters — they were ordinary British Asian men who had been radicalised through a combination of online content, mosque networks, and training visits to Pakistan.

Musharraf's government condemned the bombings and announced new measures against extremist organisations. But the fundamental problem — that Pakistan had spent twenty years building jihadist infrastructure that was now producing blowback not just within Pakistan but across the world — was not addressable through announcements. The ISI's relationships with organisations linked to international terrorism were too deeply embedded to be severed quickly or cleanly.

The Pakistani Taliban: Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan Takes Shape

Through 2004 and 2005, the movement that would formally coalesce as the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) in 2007 was taking shape in FATA and the adjacent settled districts. Pakistani militants who had fought in Afghanistan — both veterans of the 1980s jihad and a new generation inspired by al-Qaeda's global jihad ideology — were turning their weapons and networks against the Pakistani state itself.

The triggering event was Pakistan's cooperation with the American-led campaign in Afghanistan and the military operations in FATA. Militants who had previously been tacitly tolerated as assets in Pakistan's Kashmir and Afghanistan policy now regarded the Pakistani state — which they saw as an American collaborator — as an apostate government deserving of armed resistance.

Baitullah Mehsud emerged in South Waziristan as a significant militant commander, organising Mehsud tribal fighters into a cohesive force that challenged the army's operations. Suicide bombings, previously almost unknown within Pakistan, began to occur. The security of Pakistani cities — which had been insulated from the violence of the tribal areas — began to be threatened.

Musharraf's Pakistan in Mid-Decade: Achievements and Contradictions

By 2005, Musharraf's Pakistan presented a series of dramatic contradictions. The economy was growing at over 7% — the fastest sustained growth since the Ayub era. Foreign exchange reserves had been rebuilt. Mobile telephone penetration was expanding rapidly, transforming communication and commerce. Private television channels — deregulated by Musharraf in 2002 — had created a vibrant, sometimes chaotic media landscape. The middle class was growing and increasingly aspirational.

Yet against these genuine achievements stood equally genuine failures. The war on terror was generating a domestic insurgency that the security forces were ill-equipped to manage. The jihadist networks that had been cultivated for decades were turning on their creators. Political parties were excluded from power; Benazir Bhutto was in exile; Nawaz Sharif was in Saudi exile; and the military-backed civilian politicians lacked genuine public legitimacy.

The judges, lawyers, and civil society activists who would eventually bring Musharraf down through the lawyers' movement of 2007 were already articulating their concerns about the independence of the judiciary and the rule of law. The contradiction between Musharraf's 'enlightened moderation' rhetoric and the reality of military rule, selective accountability, and jihadist tolerance was becoming harder to sustain.

Pakistan in 2005: Statistical Snapshot

Population: ~158 million | President: General Pervez Musharraf | Prime Minister: Shaukat Aziz | GDP growth: ~7.7% | Mobile phone subscribers: ~13 million (rapidly growing) | Kashmir earthquake deaths: ~73,000 (October 2005) | Private TV channels: 30+ (deregulated from 2002) | Afghan refugees still in Pakistan: ~1 million | American aid since 2001: ~$10 billion

Pakistan and the War on Terror 2001–2005

Ally, Adversary, or Both? The Impossible Double Game

The Strategic Logic of Pakistan's Double Game

Pakistan's position in the War on Terror was characterised by a 'double game' that Western analysts, intelligence services, and politicians documented with growing frustration. Publicly and to some extent operationally, Pakistan cooperated with the American campaign: it captured hundreds of al-Qaeda operatives, provided intelligence, shared access to air bases, and conducted military operations in FATA against specified targets.

Simultaneously, elements of the ISI maintained relationships with Taliban commanders, facilitated the passage of fighters across the Durand Line, and protected some militant networks — particularly those focused on Kashmir, like Lashkar-e-Taiba — that the Pakistani military regarded as strategic assets separate from the al-Qaeda global jihad.

The Pakistani military's internal logic was coherent even if internationally unacceptable: the Taliban were a hedge against Indian influence in Afghanistan; LeT was an instrument of Kashmir policy that could not be abandoned without strategic loss; and full cooperation with America would require dismantling networks that might be needed in future contingencies. The costs of this calculation would become clear in the domestic terrorism that began to explode from 2005 onwards.

The FATA: Pakistan's Ungoverned Spaces

The Federally Administered Tribal Areas — seven agencies along the Afghan border with a combined population of approximately 3.5 million in 2005 — were among the most consequential pieces of territory in the world. Their semi-autonomous status under the colonial-era Frontier Crimes Regulations meant they were technically part of Pakistan but effectively outside the Pakistani constitution, court system, and civil administration.

The FATA had been the primary conduit for the Afghan jihad of the 1980s, the base for Kashmir-focused militant groups in the 1990s, and now the sanctuary for al-Qaeda and Taliban remnants after 2001. The Pakistani Army's operations there from 2004 onwards were the first significant state military presence in areas that had been governed by tribal jirgas under the Frontier Crimes Regulations for over a century.

The political economy of the FATA — underdeveloped, illiterate, economically marginalised, and connected to Afghanistan through family, tribal, and commercial ties that transcended the Durand Line — made it fertile ground for radicalisation. Young men without education or economic prospects found purpose and income in the militant networks. The Pakistani state's failure to govern and develop the FATA over decades was the structural foundation of the insurgency.

Al-Qaeda in Pakistan: High-Value Target Captures

Pakistan's cooperation with the CIA in capturing al-Qaeda operatives was genuine and significant. Several of the highest-value al-Qaeda targets were captured in Pakistani cities — not in the tribal areas — suggesting that al-Qaeda had support networks in Pakistan's urban centres.

Abu Zubaydah was captured in Faisalabad in March 2002; Ramzi bin al-Shibh (a September 11 planner) in Karachi in September 2002; Khalid Sheikh Mohammed (the operational mastermind of September 11) in Rawalpindi in March 2003; and many others. These captures confirmed both the depth of al-Qaeda's penetration into Pakistani society and the ISI's operational cooperation with the

CIA.

The captures also raised uncomfortable questions: how had senior al-Qaeda operatives established safe houses in major Pakistani cities? Were Pakistani intelligence or military figures providing protection? These questions were diplomatically sensitive and were not pursued as aggressively as the evidence warranted.

Pakistani Society 1995–2005: Modernisation and Its Discontents

Mobile Phones, Private TV, and the Middle Class Revolution

The Telecommunications Revolution

The most transformative social development of this decade was the rapid spread of mobile telephony following the licensing of new mobile operators in 2003-04. Pakistan's mobile subscriber base grew from fewer than 750,000 in 2001 to over 13 million by the end of 2005 and would reach 90 million within a decade. The mobile phone transformed commerce, communication, family life, and eventually politics.

For rural Pakistanis who had never had access to a fixed telephone — landline penetration was below 5% nationally — the mobile phone provided a first communication link to markets, family members in cities and abroad, and emergency services. Agricultural communities used mobile phones to check commodity prices before selling. Migrant workers communicated with families left behind. The mobile phone was, with the possible exception of the Green Revolution, the most significant technological intervention in rural Pakistani life since independence.

Private Television and the Media Revolution

Musharraf's deregulation of the electronic media in 2002 unleashed a private television revolution that transformed Pakistani public life. Within three years, dozens of private news and entertainment channels were broadcasting, competing with the state-owned PTV for audiences and advertising revenue.

The private news channels brought a new culture of aggressive, competitive journalism to Pakistan. Live political talk shows — featuring politicians, analysts, and journalists debating in real time — became the dominant format. Breaking news coverage, investigative reporting, and editorial commentary that would have been impossible under Zia's censorship or even under the relatively free but resource-constrained media of the 1990s was now ubiquitous.

The media revolution had complicated consequences. It produced genuinely important journalism — exposing corruption, holding public figures accountable, and informing citizens. It also produced sensationalism, irresponsibility, and media manipulation by political interests. The ISI and military intelligence adapted to the new media environment by developing relationships with and influences over television channel owners and anchors — the tactics of media management changed but the impulse to manage the media did not disappear.

The Growing Middle Class and Urban Aspirations

Pakistan's urban middle class grew significantly through this decade, driven by economic growth, educational expansion, remittances, and the IT and services sectors. The aspirations of this class — for better governance, less corruption, rule of law, and the consumer goods and lifestyle that economic growth was making possible — were reshaping Pakistani politics.

Shopping malls, multiplex cinemas, and fast-food chains appeared in Karachi, Lahore, and Islamabad. Foreign brands became status symbols. English-medium private schools proliferated, creating a class of young Pakistanis who were educated in English, connected to global culture through the internet and satellite television, and increasingly disconnected from the Urdu-medium,

state-school educated majority.

This middle class would become the base for Imran Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf in subsequent years — urban, educated, English-speaking, disgusted with the corruption of both Benazir's PPP and Nawaz's PML-N, and attracted to a political figure who offered a message of clean governance and national pride. The social foundation for PTI's eventual rise was being built through the economic and cultural changes of this decade.

Nuclear Pakistan: Managing Deterrence and International Pressure

Life After Chagai — the Costs and Benefits of Going Nuclear

The Strategic Logic of Pakistani Deterrence

Pakistan's nuclear tests of 1998 formalised what had been an open secret for over a decade: South Asia was a nuclear-armed region in which the old conventional military balance no longer determined strategic outcomes. For Pakistan, the formal declaration of nuclear status had several immediate benefits: it deterred Indian military action across the international border, it complicated Indian strategic planning, and it — paradoxically — created conditions under which Pakistan could be more assertive (as Kargil demonstrated) while relying on nuclear deterrence to prevent escalation.

The Pakistani military developed a doctrine of 'full spectrum deterrence' that extended the nuclear threshold across a wider range of scenarios than India was comfortable with. Pakistan indicated that it would consider nuclear use not only in response to an Indian nuclear attack but also in response to an Indian conventional attack that threatened Pakistan's territorial integrity or survival — a lower threshold than India's 'no first use' policy.

The Ballistic Missile Programme

Alongside the nuclear weapons programme, Pakistan developed a ballistic missile capability that gave its deterrent credibility. The Ghauri missile — a medium-range ballistic missile with Chinese and North Korean technological roots — was tested in 1998 just before the nuclear tests, demonstrating Pakistan's ability to deliver nuclear weapons to targets across India. The Shaheen series of solid-fuel missiles provided a more reliable and survivable delivery system.

The missile programme's Chinese and North Korean connections were documented by American intelligence and created diplomatic tensions with Washington. The transfers violated international non-proliferation norms and were connected to the A.Q. Khan proliferation network's transactions with North Korea — Pakistan had exchanged North Korean missile technology for Pakistani centrifuge designs in a barter arrangement that horrified non-proliferation experts.

International Rehabilitation: From Pariah to Partner

The September 11 attacks transformed Pakistan's international standing with remarkable speed. In September 2001, Pakistan was under international sanctions for its nuclear tests and its military government was unrecognised by most Western capitals. By October 2001, it was America's essential partner in the most important military campaign since Vietnam, and the sanctions were being lifted.

The rehabilitation was real but fragile. American policymakers had not changed their assessments of Pakistan's problematic nuclear programme, its ISI's support for militant groups, or its governance deficits. They had simply recalculated that Pakistan's cooperation was more valuable than consistent application of non-proliferation or democracy promotion principles. This calculation — the same one made by Reagan during the Afghan war — would again prove temporary when Pakistani and American strategic interests diverged.

India-Pakistan Relations 1995-2005: War, Peace, and Nuclear Standoff

The Most Dangerous Decade in South Asian History

The Lahore Process: Hope Before Kargil

The early months of 1999 represented the highest point of India-Pakistan diplomatic engagement since the Simla Agreement of 1972. Prime Minister Vajpayee travelled by bus from Amritsar to Lahore on 20 February 1999 in a gesture of extraordinary political courage, initiating a peace process that briefly offered genuine hope for normalisation.

The Lahore Declaration committed both countries to composite dialogue on all bilateral issues, nuclear risk reduction, and people-to-people contact. Accompanying agreements on nuclear confidence-building measures represented genuine progress in managing the newly overt nuclear relationship.

The destruction of the Lahore process by the Kargil operation — planned and launched while Vajpayee was literally travelling to Lahore — was one of the most consequential acts of strategic self-destruction in Pakistani history. It confirmed the worst fears of those who argued the military could not be trusted to support civilian peace initiatives.

The 2001-2002 Military Standoff: Nuclear-Armed States at the Brink

The December 2001 terrorist attack on the Indian Parliament — carried out by Jaish-e-Mohammad and Lashkar-e-Taiba — brought India and Pakistan to the brink of war. India mobilised approximately half a million troops along the international border and LoC. Pakistan matched the mobilisation. For months, nearly a million soldiers from two nuclear-armed states faced each other across the border in the most dangerous military standoff since the Cuban Missile Crisis.

The crisis was defused through intensive American diplomacy by Secretary of State Colin Powell and Deputy Secretary Armitage, who extracted from Musharraf commitments to crack down on cross-border terrorism. The standoff ultimately ended in October 2002 without military conflict, but demonstrated with terrifying clarity how a terrorist attack could rapidly escalate to nuclear crisis between South Asian neighbours.

The 2001-02 standoff accelerated both countries' investment in ballistic missile capabilities and nuclear command-and-control systems. It also made Pakistani-based militant organisations an international security priority rather than merely a bilateral India-Pakistan concern.

The Kashmir Backchannel: Closest to Peace

Through 2004-05, secret backchannel negotiations between Indian and Pakistani officials developed a framework for a Kashmir settlement that came closer to agreement than any previous diplomatic effort. The framework, built around soft borders, autonomy for both parts of Kashmir, and gradual normalisation of trade and movement, was discussed seriously by both governments.

The reduction in cross-LoC violence — as ISI support for the insurgency was partially curtailed after Musharraf's 2002 commitment — created space for dialogue. The LoC ceasefire of 2003 held and the composite dialogue relaunched in 2004 made slow but real progress on multiple issues.

The backchannel ultimately did not reach conclusion, partly because Musharraf's political position weakened domestically and partly because neither side was willing to take the domestic political

risks a formal settlement would require. But its existence demonstrated that a negotiated Kashmir settlement was not inherently impossible.

Musharraf: The Political Project of Enlightened Moderation

Military Modernism and Its Deep Contradictions

Enlightened Moderation: Concept and Reality

Musharraf articulated a philosophy he called 'Enlightened Moderation' — the idea that Pakistan could reconcile Islamic identity with modernity, democracy, and economic development, and that this was the most effective response to extremism. He promoted this concept both domestically and internationally, presenting Pakistan as a model Muslim state.

The concept had genuine elements. Musharraf was personally secular and genuinely opposed to Taliban-style Islamisation. He allowed women's participation in sports, permitted private television's relatively open content, and promoted a business-friendly cosmopolitanism. The contrast with Zia's Pakistan was real.

Yet Enlightened Moderation was contradicted by political realities. Musharraf depended on the MMA for parliamentary support. He maintained the Hudood Ordinances until 2006. The madrassas producing extremists continued operating with limited oversight. ISI support for militant groups continued selectively. Enlightened Moderation was a governing philosophy for the educated elite; it barely reached the social forces producing the extremism it claimed to combat.

The Media Deregulation and Its Unintended Consequences

Musharraf's decision to deregulate the electronic media in 2002 was one of the most consequential policy decisions of his tenure. Private television channels proliferated: within three years, over thirty channels were broadcasting, competing with state PTV for audiences. The new channels created a journalism culture that was competitive, aggressive, and — for the first time — capable of holding public figures accountable in real time.

The private news media became simultaneously Musharraf's greatest communications achievement and his undoing. The same television infrastructure he had created would broadcast the lawyers' movement of 2007, the judges' restoration campaign, and eventually the protests that eroded his legitimacy. By creating a free media, Musharraf had created the instrument of his own political destruction.

The media revolution also had negative consequences: sensationalism, irresponsible reporting, manufactured controversies, and the monetisation of outrage became features of the new media landscape. The ISI and military intelligence adapted, developing relationships with channel owners and 'paid media' arrangements — but the fundamental openness of the new media environment could not be fully controlled.

The Lawyers: A Civil Society Movement Forms

Among the most significant developments of this period was the gradual assertion of the superior judiciary's independence under Chief Justice Iftikhar Muhammad Chaudhry. The Supreme Court began taking suo motu notice of enforced disappearances — cases where the security services detained individuals without legal process — and summoning intelligence officials to explain the whereabouts of the 'disappeared'.

The bar associations across Pakistan — always a centre of institutional resistance to authoritarianism — were building a civil society movement around the principles of judicial independence and rule of law. The lawyers who had organised against Zia's martial law in the 1980s were now training a new generation in the same tradition.

Musharraf's eventual attempt to remove Chief Justice Chaudhry in March 2007 would trigger the lawyers' movement that would prove fatal to his political position. The seeds of that movement were planted in this period as an independent judiciary began asserting its constitutional role against a military government accustomed to deference.

Society and Culture: Pakistan in the Early 2000s

A Nation Between Modernisation and Tradition

The Middle Class Revolution and Consumer Culture

Pakistan's urban middle class grew significantly through this decade, driven by economic growth, educational expansion, the telecommunications revolution, and remittances. The aspirations of this class — for better governance, consumer goods, entertainment, and the lifestyle that economic growth was making possible — were reshaping Pakistani culture.

Shopping malls appeared in Karachi, Lahore, and Islamabad, featuring international fast-food brands and local designer clothing. Multiplex cinemas brought back audiences that had abandoned deteriorating single-screen theatres. English-medium private schools proliferated, creating a generation of young Pakistanis educated in English and connected to global culture through satellite television and, increasingly, the internet.

This consumption culture coexisted with deep poverty. Pakistan's Gini coefficient — a measure of income inequality — was high and worsening. The same decade that produced shopping malls in Lahore's Defence area saw millions of children out of school and hundreds of thousands without access to clean water in interior Sindh and Balochistan.

Sectarian Violence: The Darkening of Pakistani Islam

The sectarian conflict between Shia and Sunni militant organisations reached new levels of ferocity through this decade. Lashkar-e-Jhangvi conducted systematic assassination campaigns against Shia professionals, religious leaders, and community figures. Attacks on Shia mosques during Friday prayers, on Muharram processions, and on Shia residential areas became a recurring horror.

The attack on worshippers at a Shia mosque in Mominpura, Lahore in 1998, the massacre of Shia pilgrims in various incidents, and numerous targeted killings demonstrated that Pakistan's religious minority communities faced lethal violence that the state was increasingly unable to prevent. The perpetrators — connected to the same networks that served Pakistan's Afghanistan and Kashmir policies — existed in a zone of partial impunity.

The government's counter-terrorism operations after September 2001 targeted al-Qaeda affiliates more aggressively than domestic sectarian organisations, partly because the latter were intertwined with the strategic assets Pakistan was reluctant to fully dismantle. The result was a security environment in which some terrorism was actively combated while other terrorism was selectively tolerated.

Women's Rights: The Hudood Reform Debate

Pressure to reform the Hudood Ordinances — Zia's 1979 laws that had devastated women's access to justice — built through this decade. Women's organisations, human rights groups, lawyers, and international NGOs documented the systematic abuse of the Zina Ordinance against women who reported rape or fled abusive marriages.

The statistics were damning: a significant proportion of women in Pakistani jails in the 1990s and early 2000s were held under the Hudood Ordinances, many of them rape victims charged with adultery. The cases attracted international attention and generated genuine outrage among Pakistani civil society.

Musharraf's government was reluctant to repeal the Hudood Ordinances for fear of antagonising the religious parties on whose parliamentary support it depended. The Women's Protection Bill that eventually reformed the most egregious provisions of the Zina Ordinance was passed in 2006 — over fierce resistance from the MMA and religious lobby — and represented one of the more significant legislative achievements of Musharraf's tenure, however delayed.

The Afghan Taliban and Pakistan's Strategic Trap 1996-2005

How Pakistan's Creation Became Its Greatest Security Threat

The Taliban Government 1996-2001: Pakistan's Problematic Client

The Taliban government that ruled most of Afghanistan from September 1996 to December 2001 was Pakistan's most consequential foreign policy creation and its most embarrassing international liability. Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE were the only countries to recognise the regime. The international isolation this brought — UN sanctions, diplomatic condemnation, withdrawal of NGOs — complicated Pakistan's own international standing.

The Taliban's governance was a catastrophe for Afghanistan. The banning of women's education and employment destroyed human capital; the destruction of cultural heritage, including the Bamiyan Buddhas in March 2001, alienated the international community; and the provision of sanctuary to al-Qaeda created the conditions for September 11.

Pakistan's ISI maintained its relationship with the Taliban leadership throughout this period, providing support, intelligence, and sanctuary for Taliban officials in Quetta and other Pakistani cities. The ISI calculated that the Taliban, for all their social extremism, served Pakistan's strategic interests in Afghanistan and were preferable to an Afghan government that might be influenced by India.

Post-2001: The Quetta Shura and the Taliban's Reconstitution

After the Taliban government's collapse in December 2001, the Taliban leadership — including Mullah Omar — reconstituted in Quetta, the capital of Pakistan's Balochistan province. The 'Quetta Shura' (council) that directed the Taliban insurgency against the American-led coalition and the new Afghan government operated from Pakistani soil with the ISI's knowledge and, according to American intelligence, tolerance.

The Haqqani Network, based in North Waziristan, was another critical component of the Taliban's reconstituted infrastructure. Jalaluddin Haqqani — a veteran of the 1980s jihad who had been a particular ISI favourite — commanded a network that conducted some of the most devastating attacks in Afghanistan while maintaining close relationships with both al-Qaeda and the ISI.

American frustration with Pakistan's double game was captured in the phrase 'snakes in your backyard': if Pakistan allowed the Taliban to reconstitute on its soil, the snakes would eventually bite Pakistan too. This prediction proved accurate when the Pakistani Taliban (TTP) emerged to conduct terrorist attacks inside Pakistan from 2007 onwards.

The Tribal Areas: A State Within a State

The Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) and their relationship to the Pakistani state was one of the most consequential governance failures of this entire period. FATA's approximately 3.5 million people were governed under the colonial-era Frontier Crimes Regulations that denied them the constitutional rights available to other Pakistanis: no access to the courts, no political parties, no elected provincial assembly representation.

This governance vacuum — combined with the cross-border ethnic and tribal connections to Afghanistan, the economic marginalisation of the region, and the weapons and jihadi ideology that

had flooded in during the 1980s Afghan war — created ideal conditions for militant organisation. The Pakistani army's operations from 2004 onwards could not substitute for the political and developmental engagement that the tribal areas had been denied for decades.

The eventual merger of FATA into Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province in 2018 — bringing constitutional rights and the court system to the tribal areas — was a reform that should have happened decades earlier. Its delay cost Pakistan enormously in lives, security, and the human development of millions of citizens.

Pakistan in 2005: Stocktaking at the Decade's End

Where the Country Stood After Ten Years of Nuclear Tests, Coup, and War on Terror

Political Landscape: Managed Democracy

Pakistan's political system in 2005 was what analysts called 'managed democracy' — elections were held, assemblies functioned, a Prime Minister governed, but ultimate power remained with General Musharraf and the military establishment behind him. The major political parties — PPP and PML-N — were weakened, their leaders in exile, and their organisations operating under constraints that limited their effectiveness.

The parliamentary system functioned within the parameters that Musharraf had set through the LFO and Seventeenth Amendment. Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz was a capable technocrat but not a political figure with independent legitimacy — his position depended entirely on Musharraf's continued support. The MMA, which had provided the parliamentary votes for the Seventeenth Amendment, was an unreliable coalition partner whose Islamic agenda was at odds with Musharraf's Enlightened Moderation.

The fundamental problem of Pakistani politics — that the military's institutional interests dominated all political calculations — had not been resolved and showed no signs of resolution. Pakistan was in 2005 exactly where it had been in 1960, 1978, and 1999: governed by a general who had promised a return to democracy and was delivering managed stability instead.

Security: A Gathering Storm

Pakistan's internal security situation in 2005 was deteriorating beneath the surface of the macroeconomic success story. The FATA was increasingly destabilised by military operations that were generating resentment without eliminating the militant networks they targeted. Suicide bombings — almost unknown in Pakistan before 2001 — were becoming more frequent.

The Pakistani Taliban was organising. Baitullah Mehsud in South Waziristan, Faqir Mohammad in Bajaur, and other commanders were building the networks that would formally coalesce as the TTP in 2007. Their ideology — combining Pashtun tribal grievance with Deobandi religious extremism and al-Qaeda's global jihad narrative — was recruiting effectively among young men in FATA and adjacent areas.

The security establishment's response was still primarily military — operations and deals — rather than the political and developmental engagement that would have addressed the underlying conditions. The army's institutional culture, trained for conventional warfare against India, was slow to develop the counter-insurgency doctrine and tactics that the FATA environment required.

The International Position: Fragile Rehabilitation

Pakistan's international position in 2005 was stronger than it had been at any time since the nuclear tests of 1998, but built on fragile foundations. American strategic partnership provided financial resources and diplomatic cover but also entanglements — the War on Terror commitment was generating domestic terrorism and political opposition that would eventually destabilise Musharraf's position.

Relations with India were at their best since Partition, though the fundamental disputes — Kashmir, water, trade — remained unresolved. The China relationship was as solid as ever; Beijing was deepening its economic engagement with Pakistan through infrastructure projects and investment. The Gulf states remained important sources of financial support and the destination for Pakistani migrant workers.

Yet Pakistan's international reputation was compromised by the A.Q. Khan proliferation scandal, by the ISI's ambiguous relationship with Taliban and al-Qaeda networks, and by the democratic deficit of military rule. Pakistan was simultaneously too strategically important to be sanctioned and too problematic to be treated as a normal partner.

Pakistan's Provinces in the 2000s: Divergent Trajectories

How Punjab, Sindh, NWFP, and Balochistan Experienced the Decade Differently

Punjab: Growth, Patronage, and PML-Q Dominance

Punjab, with approximately 60% of Pakistan's population, remained the political and economic centre of gravity. Under the PML-Q government backed by Musharraf, Punjab's administration was run by politicians who had broken from Nawaz Sharif's PML-N — the 'King's party' that depended on government patronage rather than independent political support.

Punjab's economy continued to grow — industrial production in Lahore, Faisalabad, and Sialkot expanded; agricultural productivity in the central Punjab canal-irrigated areas remained high; and the service sector in Lahore grew rapidly. The Lahore-Islamabad motorway M2, inaugurated in 1997, had transformed inter-city commerce and travel.

The province's social indicators, while still poor by international standards, were the best in Pakistan. Female literacy in urban Punjab was significantly higher than national averages. The private school sector was expanding rapidly. Punjab's relative prosperity compared to other provinces reinforced resentments that had deep historical roots.

Sindh: Karachi's Recovery and Rural Stagnation

Sindh presented a tale of two realities. Karachi, following the military operation of 1995 and subsequent security improvements, had recovered significantly from the worst of the ethnic violence. The MQM, brought into Musharraf's coalition, had moderated its confrontational posture and Karachi's commercial life was recovering. The stock exchange was booming; the port was operating; construction was expanding.

Rural Sindh, however, remained trapped in the feudal political economy that had characterised it for generations. Large landlords — the waderas — maintained political and economic control over their tenants and haris (agricultural workers) through patronage and coercion. Access to education, health, and clean water in interior Sindh remained among the worst in South Asia. The PPP's dominance in rural Sindh was sustained partly by genuine Bhutto loyalism and partly by the feudal power structures that the party had historically accommodated.

NWFP and Balochistan: The Frontier Provinces Under Pressure

The North-West Frontier Province was experiencing the full weight of Pakistan's Afghan war decisions. Three million Afghan refugees — reduced from the peak but still enormous — remained in the province. The MMA government, elected in 2002, was implementing an Islamisation agenda that restricted music, mixed-gender spaces, and secular education in ways that alarmed civil society but had limited practical enforcement capacity.

Balochistan, chronically underdeveloped and politically alienated, was entering another period of insurgent activity. The killing of Nawab Akbar Bugti — a prominent Baloch tribal leader — by military forces in August 2006 (just beyond this volume) would trigger a major insurgency. But through 2005, the tension was building as Baloch political and tribal leaders resisted what they saw as Punjabi-dominated federal exploitation of their province's resources.

The Gwadar Port project — China's major infrastructure investment on the Balochistan coast, begun in 2002 — was transforming the province's strategic importance. Pakistan envisioned Gwadar as a deep-sea port serving as China's access to the Arabian Sea and as a catalyst for Balochistan's economic development. Baloch nationalists were sceptical that local communities would benefit and feared demographic changes from non-Baloch settlers attracted by the project.

Water, Environment, and Climate: Long-Term Challenges Emerge

Pakistan's Resource Constraints Begin to Define Its Future

The Water Crisis: Indus Basin Under Stress

Pakistan's dependence on the Indus river system for irrigation — the foundation of its agricultural economy — was creating growing vulnerability as population growth increased demand, inefficient irrigation systems wasted water, and upstream glaciers showed early signs of the climate stress that would become dramatically evident in subsequent decades.

The Indus Waters Treaty of 1960, negotiated by the World Bank, divided the Indus system between India (the eastern rivers: Ravi, Beas, Sutlej) and Pakistan (the western rivers: Indus, Jhelum, Chenab). Pakistan's water security depended on Indian compliance with the treaty — a source of persistent anxiety given the state of India-Pakistan relations.

Within Pakistan, the distribution of water between provinces — particularly between Punjab (the upstream province) and Sindh (downstream) — was a source of chronic political tension. Sindhi politicians and farmers consistently complained that Punjab was diverting more than its share of the Indus waters, depriving downstream agriculture and the Indus delta of adequate flow.

Deforestation, Soil Degradation, and Urban Pollution

Pakistan's environmental degradation through this period was severe and largely unaddressed. Forest cover — already low by regional standards — was declining as rural communities used wood for fuel and as illegal timber cutting in NWFP's forests continued despite nominal regulation. The deforestation increased flooding risk in downstream areas and reduced the watershed protection that forests provided.

Soil degradation from waterlogging and salinity — a consequence of decades of poorly drained irrigation — was reducing agricultural productivity in significant areas of Punjab and Sindh. The Salinity Control and Reclamation Project (SCARP) had addressed some of this but the problem continued to expand.

Urban air pollution in Karachi, Lahore, and other major cities was reaching crisis levels as vehicle numbers increased rapidly without corresponding improvements in fuel quality or emission standards. Industrial pollution of rivers — particularly the Ravi near Lahore and the Hub River near Karachi — was severe. Environmental regulation existed on paper but enforcement was minimal.

Pakistan's Civil Society and Human Rights 1995-2005

Lawyers, Activists, and Journalists Who Held the Line

The Human Rights Commission of Pakistan

The Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP), established in 1987 as an independent non-governmental organisation, became one of Pakistan's most important civil society institutions through this decade. Under the successive chairmanship of figures like Asma Jahangir and I.A. Rehman, the HRCP documented human rights abuses, provided legal assistance to victims, and maintained a consistent public voice for accountability.

Asma Jahangir in particular became a symbol of courageous civil society activism. A prominent lawyer who had defended women in blasphemy cases, honour killing victims' families, and political prisoners, she faced death threats from religious extremists, harassment from intelligence services, and occasional arrest. Her willingness to continue despite these pressures made her an internationally recognised human rights defender.

The HRCP's annual reports documented the state of human rights in Pakistan with a comprehensiveness and frankness that the government's own institutions could not match. These reports — covering extrajudicial killings, enforced disappearances, torture in custody, sectarian violence, and the conditions of minorities — provided the international community with reliable information about a country that had significant incentives to manage its public image.

The Legal Profession: Institutional Resistance

Pakistan's legal profession maintained a tradition of institutional resistance to authoritarianism that stretched back to the colonial period. The bar associations of the superior courts — the Supreme Court Bar Association and the high court bar associations — were forums for debate about judicial independence, constitutional governance, and the rule of law that military governments found difficult to suppress without embarrassment.

The lawyers who appeared before the superior courts represented a class of professionally educated, economically independent, and politically engaged citizens who had both the skills and the professional interest to defend constitutional principles. When Musharraf eventually confronted the judiciary in 2007, it was the legal profession that provided the organisational backbone of the resistance movement.

Women's Movements: Resistance and Progress

Women's organisations — the Women's Action Forum, Shirkat Gah, Aurat Foundation, and dozens of smaller groups across Pakistan — continued their work of documentation, advocacy, and service provision through this decade. Their campaigns focused on the Hudood Ordinances, honour killings, domestic violence, and the economic marginalisation of women.

The 'karo-kari' or honour killing phenomenon — in which women accused of bringing 'dishonour' to their families were murdered by male relatives with minimal legal consequences — received increasing public and international attention. HRCP documented hundreds of cases annually. The Pakistani government, under both democratic and military rule, was slow to criminalise the practice effectively.

Women's economic participation grew despite these obstacles. Female employment in the garment, health, and education sectors expanded. Women entrepreneurs in urban areas accessed formal credit for the first time. The contradiction between the structural discrimination embedded in law and social practice and the lived reality of increasing women's agency was one of the defining tensions of Pakistani society.

The Afghan Refugee Experience: Three Decades of Displacement

Pakistan's Largest and Most Enduring Humanitarian Challenge

The Refugee Crisis in 2005: Reduction Without Resolution

By 2005, the Afghan refugee population in Pakistan had declined significantly from its peak of over three million in the mid-1990s. The UNHCR-assisted voluntary repatriation programme, which began in 2002 following the Taliban's fall, had facilitated the return of approximately 2.5 million Afghan refugees — one of the largest repatriation exercises in history. But approximately one million Afghans remained in Pakistan, and new arrivals from the continuing Afghan conflict offset some of the departures.

The refugees who remained were among the most vulnerable: those who could not return because their home areas were insecure, who had lost their rural land to other occupants, or who had established economic lives in Pakistan over decades and lacked viable alternatives in Afghanistan. A generation of Afghans born in Pakistan had never seen their country and identified more with Pakistan than Afghanistan.

The continued refugee presence had ongoing social, economic, and security implications for Pakistan. Refugee communities in NWFP and Balochistan remained sources of recruitment for Taliban and other militant networks. The economic competition between refugees and local populations generated friction. And the political complications of hosting refugees from a neighbouring country engaged in conflict with Pakistan's superpower ally continued to create diplomatic difficulties.

The Human Cost of Three Wars: Legacy of Violence

Pakistan's role as the primary staging ground for the Afghan wars of the 1980s, the civil war of the 1990s, and now the post-2001 conflict had imposed enormous costs on Pakistani society. These costs were rarely fully acknowledged in Pakistani public discourse, which tended to focus on the strategic rationale for involvement while minimising the social consequences.

The weapons that had flooded into Pakistan during the anti-Soviet jihad — Kalashnikovs, rocket-propelled grenades, anti-tank missiles — had never been retrieved. They fuelled criminal violence, sectarian killings, and political terrorism across the country. The Kalashnikov culture that the Afghan war had created was a permanent feature of Pakistani society.

The heroin epidemic created by Afghan opium production and Pakistani trafficking had damaged hundreds of thousands of Pakistani families. The radicalised religious culture promoted by the madrassa explosion of the Zia era had changed Pakistani Islam in ways that would take generations to reverse. The costs of Pakistan's strategic choices were real, enormous, and largely unpaid.

Sports: Pakistan Cricket After the World Cup

Pakistan cricket in the late 1990s and early 2000s struggled to maintain the heights of the 1992 World Cup triumph. The team remained capable of brilliant individual and collective performances — Wasim Akram's reverse swing, Saqlain Mushtaq's doosra, Inzamam's batting genius, and Shoaib Akhtar's raw pace gave Pakistan a team that could beat anyone on their day.

But match-fixing allegations — culminating in the Qayyum Commission inquiry of 1999-2000 that found evidence of corrupt practices by several players — damaged Pakistan cricket's reputation and morale. The commission's findings led to bans on several prominent players including Salim Malik and Ata-ur-Rehman, and cast a shadow over Pakistan cricket that took years to dissipate.

The Imran Khan generation's retirement — Imran himself had retired in 1992, Javed Miandad in 1996, Wasim Akram in 2003 — marked the end of a golden era. The successor generation, while talented, was more inconsistent and less dominant than the team that had won the World Cup. Pakistan's cricket nonetheless remained a source of national identity and sporting achievement that transcended the country's political difficulties.

The Internet Age Arrives: Connectivity and Its Consequences

Internet access in Pakistan grew significantly through this decade, though from a very low base. Pakistan's first internet connection was established in 1995; by 2005 there were approximately 8 million internet users — still a small fraction of the population but representing rapid growth. Internet cafes proliferated in urban areas; universities connected; and the growing middle class accessed email and the World Wide Web from home.

The internet's political consequences were beginning to manifest. Online discussion forums, email networks, and eventually blogs created spaces for political discourse that were outside the state's traditional media control framework. Diaspora Pakistanis used the internet to maintain connections with Pakistan, organise politically, and distribute news and analysis that Pakistani media might not publish.

The government's attitude toward the internet was ambivalent: it wanted the economic benefits of connectivity while seeking to control politically inconvenient content. Sporadic blocking of specific websites — mainly pornography but occasionally political content — was the government's initial response. The systematic internet censorship apparatus that would develop in later years was still rudimentary.

The Gwadar Port: China's Strategic Investment Begins

The construction of Gwadar deep-sea port in Balochistan, begun in 2002 with Chinese financing and engineering, represented one of the most strategically significant infrastructure projects in Pakistan's history. Gwadar's location — on the Arabian Sea coast, close to the Strait of Hormuz and within relatively short distance of China's western regions through the Karakoram Highway — made it a potential trade and energy corridor of enormous importance.

The China-Pakistan partnership on Gwadar was the early manifestation of what would eventually become the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) — a multi-billion dollar infrastructure programme that would transform Pakistan's economic geography and deepen its strategic dependence on China. Through 2005, the port was under construction and the full scope of Chinese investment was not yet apparent.

Baloch nationalist opposition to Gwadar was immediate and sustained. Local communities feared displacement, demographic change as non-Baloch workers arrived, and the diversion of economic benefits to outsiders rather than local people. The federal government's failure to consult or adequately compensate affected communities added the Gwadar project to the list of Baloch grievances that would fuel the insurgency of subsequent years.

Education Expansion: Quantity Without Quality

Pakistan's university sector expanded dramatically through this decade. The Higher Education Commission (HEC), established in 2002 under Atta-ur-Rahman, launched an ambitious programme to expand university capacity, send thousands of Pakistani students abroad for doctoral degrees, and improve research output. New universities were established in underserved areas; scholarships were funded; and digital libraries were created.

The HEC's programme was one of the Musharraf era's genuine achievements in institution-building, though it faced criticism for prioritising quantity (number of papers published, number of PhD graduates) over the quality improvement and relevance that Pakistan's development actually required. The expansion of university education without corresponding improvement in primary and secondary quality created graduates who were formally credentialled but poorly prepared for the knowledge economy.

The primary education crisis remained the most urgent educational challenge. Pakistan's Net Enrolment Ratio at the primary level was still below 70% in 2005 — meaning nearly a third of school-age children were not in school. Girls' enrolment lagged boys' significantly in rural areas and in NWFP and Balochistan. The teachers who served these schools were often untrained, underpaid, and irregularly present.

The Diaspora in the War on Terror Era: Identity and Backlash

The September 11 attacks and subsequent War on Terror placed Pakistan's diaspora communities — particularly in the United States and United Kingdom — under scrutiny and pressure that had no precedent. Pakistani and Muslim communities faced increased surveillance, airport profiling, and in some cases discriminatory treatment by law enforcement. The social compact between diaspora communities and their host societies was strained.

The London bombings of July 2005 — carried out by British citizens of Pakistani origin — created a crisis of identity for British Pakistanis who were simultaneously members of British society and members of a community whose members had committed mass murder in the name of an ideology many of them rejected. The question of radicalisation — how young British-Pakistani men became terrorists — generated years of policy debate, sociological research, and community introspection.

For Pakistan itself, the diaspora's situation had political and economic implications. Remittances — a lifeline for the Pakistani economy — were under scrutiny as financial intelligence agencies sought to disrupt terrorist financing. Pakistani diplomatic missions abroad faced increased demands to monitor community members and report on extremist activities. The diaspora's role as a bridge between Pakistan and Western countries was complicated by the War on Terror's identity politics.

Conclusion: 1995–2005 — A Decade That Remade Pakistan's World

The decade from 1995 to 2005 was the most globally consequential in Pakistan's history and left the country fundamentally transformed — for better and worse — in ways that continue to define its present. Pakistan entered this period as a democratic state in chronic political crisis; it ended it as a military-governed nuclear power entangled in a global war whose full costs it had not yet begun to pay.

The nuclear tests of 1998 were simultaneously Pakistan's greatest national achievement and its most dangerous strategic gamble. The achievement was real: Pakistan had demonstrated an independent deterrent capability that fundamentally altered its strategic position. The danger was equally real: South Asia became a region where two nuclear-armed adversaries shared a contested border, had fought four wars, and had not developed the communication channels, doctrines, or trust needed to manage nuclear crises safely. The Kargil War — fought just thirteen months after both countries declared their nuclear status — demonstrated how narrow the margin between conventional conflict and nuclear escalation could become.

The September 11 decision — Musharraf's choice to join the American coalition against the Taliban — was strategically rational but strategically incomplete. Pakistan cooperated enough to restore its international standing and secure American economic and military support. It did not cooperate enough to actually dismantle the jihadist infrastructure it had built, partly because elements of the military regarded that infrastructure as a continuing strategic asset. The resulting half-measures generated the worst of both worlds: enough cooperation to make Pakistan a target of jihadist retaliation, not enough to actually eliminate the threat.

As 2005 ended, Pakistan faced a gathering storm: a domestic insurgency in FATA that was spreading to settled areas; a judicial independence movement that would challenge Musharraf's legitimacy; political parties in exile beginning to negotiate their return; and an economy that was growing but not developing the institutional foundation needed for sustainable progress. The next chapter of Pakistan's history would be shaped by how these tensions were resolved.

Appendix: Key Events Timeline 1995–2005

Date	Event
Jun 1995	Army operation launched in Karachi against MQM strongholds
Sep 1995	Taliban emerge as major force; capture Herat and other cities
20 Sep 1996	Murtaza Bhutto shot dead by police in Karachi — circumstances disputed
27 Sep 1996	Taliban capture Kabul; Najibullah tortured and hanged
5 Nov 1996	President Leghari dismisses Benazir Bhutto's 2nd government
3 Feb 1997	Elections — PML-N wins 137 seats; Nawaz Sharif becomes PM
Apr 1997	13th Amendment — Article 58(2)(b) removed; parliamentary system restored
Nov 1997	PML-N mob storms Supreme Court; CJ Sajjad Ali Shah removed
11-13 May 1998	India conducts Pokhran II nuclear tests (Operation Shakti)
28 May 1998	Pakistan conducts 5 nuclear tests at Chagai (Chagai-I)
30 May 1998	Pakistan's 6th test at Kharan (Chagai-II)
Jun 1998	International sanctions imposed; Pakistan freezes foreign currency accounts
Feb 1999	PM Vajpayee's historic Lahore bus trip; Lahore Declaration signed
May 1999	Kargil conflict begins — Pakistani troops occupy Indian positions
4 Jul 1999	Nawaz flies to Washington; Clinton demands withdrawal; Nawaz agrees
12 Oct 1999	General Musharraf's coup — Pakistan's 4th military takeover
Apr 2000	Supreme Court validates coup; gives Musharraf 3 years for elections
Apr 2000	Nawaz Sharif convicted; later exiled to Saudi Arabia
2000	National Accountability Bureau (NAB) established
2001	Local Government Ordinance — devolution to district governments
11 Sep 2001	September 11 attacks; al-Qaeda operated from Afghanistan
12 Sep 2001	Musharraf decides to join US coalition; sanctions lifted
7 Oct 2001	Operation Enduring Freedom — US bombing of Afghanistan begins
13 Nov 2001	Kabul falls to Northern Alliance; Taliban flee to Pakistan
Jan 2002	Musharraf bans LeT, JeM, SSP, TJP, LeJ
Mar 2002	Abu Zubaydah captured in Faisalabad — major al-Qaeda figure
Mar 2003	Khalid Sheikh Mohammed captured in Rawalpindi
Apr 2002	Musharraf's referendum — 98% approval (widely disputed)
Aug 2002	Legal Framework Order — constitutional amendments by presidential decree
10 Oct 2002	Elections — PML-Q largest party; MMA wins 60 seats
Dec 2003	17th Amendment — LFO incorporated into constitution with MMA support
Nov 2003	India-Pakistan LoC ceasefire announced

Date	Event
Feb 2004	A.Q. Khan confesses to nuclear proliferation on TV; immediately pardoned
2004	Army operations begin in South Waziristan; Shakai Agreement
Aug 2004	Shaukat Aziz elected Prime Minister
7 Jul 2005	London bombings — 52 killed; Pakistan connections identified
8 Oct 2005	Kashmir earthquake — magnitude 7.6; ~73,000 killed
2005	Pakistani Taliban coalescing in FATA; suicide bombings begin in Pakistan
2005	Mobile phone subscribers reach 13 million; private TV channels proliferate

Appendix: Heads of State & Government 1995–2005

Name	Role	Period
Farooq Leghari	President	Nov 1993 – Dec 1997
Wasim Sajjad	Acting President	Dec 1997 – Jan 1998
Muhammad Rafiq Tarar	President	Jan 1998 – Jun 2001
Gen. Pervez Musharraf	Chief Executive then President	Oct 1999 – Aug 2008
Benazir Bhutto	Prime Minister (2nd term)	Oct 1993 – Nov 1996
Miraj Khalid	Caretaker Prime Minister	Nov 1996 – Feb 1997
Nawaz Sharif	Prime Minister (2nd term)	Feb 1997 – Oct 1999
Zafarullah Khan Jamali	Prime Minister	Nov 2002 – Jun 2004
Chaudhry Shujaat Hussain	Prime Minister (briefly)	Jun–Aug 2004
Shaukat Aziz	Prime Minister	Aug 2004 – Nov 2007

■ Pakistan Zindabad ■

Long Live Pakistan

HISTORY OF PAKISTAN

A Comprehensive Year-by-Year Account

2005 – 2015

From Musharraf's Fall to Democracy's Fragile Consolidation and the Army's War on Its Own Creation

Covering: Politics • Governance • Economy • Military • Society • Foreign Relations

Volume VI of the Pakistan History Series. Continues from the 1947–2005 volume. Page numbering preserved across all volumes.

Foreword: A Decade of Terrorism, Democratic Transition, and Transformation

The decade from 2005 to 2015 was one of the most turbulent and consequential in Pakistan's history. It opened with General Pervez Musharraf at the height of his power — an international statesman, a modernising autocrat, and America's indispensable partner in the War on Terror. It closed with Pakistan's first-ever democratic transfer of power from one elected civilian government to another — a milestone that had eluded the country in its sixty-eight years of existence.

Between those bookends lay events of shattering importance. The assassination of Benazir Bhutto in December 2007 robbed Pakistan of its most internationally recognised democratic leader and plunged the country into grief and fury. The lawyers' movement forced the restoration of a deposed Chief Justice in a triumph of civil society. The floods of 2010 — which inundated one-fifth of Pakistan — tested the state's capacity to protect its citizens and found it wanting. The killing of Osama bin Laden in Abbottabad in 2011 exposed the profound contradictions of the Pakistan-America relationship with humiliating clarity.

Domestically, the decade saw the emergence of Imran Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf as a genuine mass political force, the PPP government of Asif Ali Zardari limp through its full term despite constant crises, and the PML-N's Nawaz Sharif return from exile to win a decisive mandate in 2013. It also saw the Pakistani Taliban inflict devastating violence across the country — thousands killed in suicide bombings, massacres, and targeted killings — before the army finally launched a serious military campaign in 2014.

This volume covers those ten years with the depth and detail they require.

2006 Bugti Killed; Hudood Reform; Musharraf's Deepening Crisis

The Year Musharraf's Grip Begins to Slip

The Killing of Nawab Akbar Bugti: 26 August 2006

On 26 August 2006, Nawab Akbar Bugti — the 79-year-old tribal chief, former Governor, and former Chief Minister of Balochistan — was killed in a military operation in a cave complex in Kohlu district where he had taken refuge from Pakistani security forces. The killing triggered the most intense wave of Baloch nationalist outrage since the 1970s.

Bugti had been one of Pakistan's most formidable political personalities — simultaneously a feudal autocrat, a populist leader, and a Baloch nationalist who had turned against the federal government over what he regarded as decades of exploitation of Balochistan's gas reserves. His killing by military forces — apparently in a deliberate operation ordered at the highest levels — transformed him from a troublesome politician into a martyr of Baloch nationalist memory.

The consequences rippled outward. The Baloch insurgency that had been simmering intensified dramatically. Attacks on gas pipelines, electricity infrastructure, and security forces multiplied. Baloch nationalist leaders fled Pakistan, organising from abroad. The Gwadar Port project, which Musharraf had hoped would anchor Balochistan's development, became a symbol of Punjabi-military colonialism in nationalist discourse.

The Women's Protection Bill: Reforming the Hudood Ordinances

In November 2006, Musharraf's government passed the Women's Protection Bill, reforming the most egregious provisions of Zia's Zina Ordinance. The bill transferred rape cases from the Hudood Ordinances (where they required four witnesses and exposed victims to adultery charges) to the Pakistan Penal Code, where normal evidentiary standards applied. DNA evidence was recognised as admissible in rape cases.

The reform was strongly opposed by the MMA — the alliance of religious parties that had provided parliamentary support for Musharraf's Seventeenth Amendment. The MMA condemned the bill as un-Islamic and organised protests across the country. Musharraf pushed the bill through anyway, using the MMA's weakened post-2005 position and support from the PPP and other secular parties.

The Women's Protection Bill was a genuine — if partial — improvement in the legal position of Pakistani women. It did not repeal the Hudood Ordinances entirely (the zero-tolerance demanded by women's rights organisations) but it addressed the most dangerous provision. The passage of the bill against religious opposition demonstrated that Musharraf, when he chose to, could override the religious establishment — something the democratic governments of the 1990s had never attempted.

The Lal Masjid Crisis Builds

The Red Mosque (Lal Masjid) in the heart of Islamabad — a stone's throw from the ISI headquarters and Pakistan's most important government buildings — became a centre of radical Islamist activity through 2006 and into 2007. The mosque's administration, led by brothers Abdul Aziz and Abdul Rashid Ghazi, ran a madrassa that openly supported the Taliban and al-Qaeda, conducted vigilante campaigns against businesses they deemed un-Islamic, and accumulated

weapons.

The government's tolerance of the Lal Masjid's radicalism for years reflected the ISI's historical relationships with the mosque's leadership and the government's reluctance to confront Islamist extremism in its own capital. By 2006, this tolerance had created a problem that would require a violent resolution — with consequences that reverberated across the country.

2007 The Lawyers' Movement; Lal Masjid; Emergency Rule; Benazir Returns

The Year That Ended Musharraf's Legitimacy

The Deposition of Chief Justice Chaudhry: 9 March 2007

On 9 March 2007, Musharraf summoned Chief Justice Iftikhar Muhammad Chaudhry to army headquarters and demanded his resignation, presenting a list of alleged misconduct charges. Chaudhry refused to resign. Musharraf suspended him and appointed a replacement, triggering a constitutional and political crisis of extraordinary proportions.

The lawyers' movement that erupted in response was unlike anything in Pakistani history. Bar associations across the country — from Karachi to Peshawar — went on strike, donning black suits and ties and taking to the streets in daily protests. When Chaudhry travelled between cities to address bar associations, lawyers lined the roads for hours, chanting slogans and showering his car with flower petals.

The lawyers' movement was significant for what it was and what it represented. It was a professional class — economically independent, institutionally organised — asserting the principle of judicial independence against a military president. It demonstrated that civil society could organise effectively against a regime that controlled the security apparatus. And it catalysed a broader movement that included journalists, civil society activists, and eventually political parties.

The Lal Masjid Operation: July 2007

The Lal Masjid standoff came to a violent end on 10 July 2007 when the Pakistan Army's Special Services Group (SSG) stormed the mosque complex after weeks of escalating confrontation. The mosque's administration — having seized hostages, attacked government property, and defied multiple government ultimatums — had barricaded hundreds of students inside the complex.

The operation, codenamed Operation Silence, killed approximately 100 people — including Abdul Rashid Ghazi, who died in the fighting — and wounded many more. The official death toll was disputed; independent estimates suggested higher casualties. Musharraf presented the operation as a necessary anti-terrorism action; critics argued that the government's earlier tolerance of the mosque's extremism had made the violent confrontation inevitable.

The Lal Masjid operation had catastrophic consequences for Pakistan's internal security. The Pakistani Taliban — already coalescing in FATA — declared war on the Pakistani state in response. A wave of suicide bombings followed across the country. The TTP formally constituted itself in December 2007 under Baitullah Mehsud. Pakistan had declared war on part of the jihadist infrastructure it had built.

Emergency Rule: 3 November 2007

On 3 November 2007, Musharraf declared a state of emergency — his second suspension of the constitution — suspending the judiciary, shutting private television channels, and arresting lawyers, politicians, and activists. The Supreme Court, on the verge of ruling that his simultaneous position as President and Army Chief was unconstitutional, was dissolved.

The emergency was international condemned. The United States — Pakistan's most important patron — expressed serious concern and threatened to review aid. Britain and other Western

countries issued protests. The democratic fig leaf that Musharraf had maintained since 2002 was stripped away.

The emergency lasted 42 days — lifted on 15 December 2007. In the intervening period, Musharraf relinquished his military position, becoming a civilian President. He was sworn in for a new presidential term under a constitutional process that the lawyers' movement and major political parties refused to recognise as legitimate.

Benazir Bhutto Returns and the Karachi Bombing: October 2007

Benazir Bhutto returned to Pakistan on 18 October 2007 after eight years in exile, landing in Karachi to enormous crowds. A power-sharing deal brokered by the United States had led Musharraf to issue a National Reconciliation Ordinance (NRO) that dropped corruption cases against Benazir, Zardari, and other politicians who had been charged during or after their time in government.

On the night of her return, as Benazir's motorcade moved through Karachi's streets in a procession of millions, two suicide bombs exploded beside her vehicle, killing 139 people. Benazir survived by luck — she had stepped down inside the vehicle moments before the explosions. The Karachi bombing was a warning of what was to come.

27 December 2007: The Assassination of Benazir Bhutto

Benazir Bhutto was assassinated on 27 December 2007 in Rawalpindi, shot after addressing a campaign rally at Liaquat Bagh — the same park where Prime Minister Liaquat Ali Khan had been assassinated in 1951. She died at Rawalpindi General Hospital at 6:16 PM. She was 54 years old.

The assassination shocked Pakistan and the world. Riots erupted across the country, particularly in Sindh where Bhutto support was deepest. Dozens were killed in the violence; billions of rupees of property was destroyed. The PPP's election campaign and Pakistan's political future were suddenly transformed.

The Pakistani Taliban claimed responsibility. The government initially blamed Baitullah Mehsud. The exact circumstances of Benazir's death — whether she died from a bullet or from hitting her head on the sunroof of her vehicle — became a controversy. The United Nations investigation concluded that her security had been inadequate and that the subsequent crime scene had been improperly handled, destroying evidence. Full accountability was never established.

> *"I have fought the forces of evil and militancy. If anything happens to me, I have written letters to President Musharraf and others saying who I believe is behind any threats against my life."*
>
> *— Benazir Bhutto, in letters written before her assassination, October 2007*

Pakistan in 2007: Key Moments
Chief Justice deposed: 9 March | Lal Masjid stormed: 10 July | Emergency declared: 3 November | Musharraf becomes civilian President | TTP formally constituted: December 2007 | Benazir assassinated: 27 December 2007 | Suicide bombings in Pakistan in 2007: 56 (up from 7 in 2006)

2008 Elections; PPP Government; Musharraf Resigns; Mumbai Attacks

Pakistan's Most Consequential Year Since 1988

The February 2008 Elections: PPP Wins, Musharraf Loses

Despite the assassination of their leader three weeks earlier, the PPP won the largest share of seats in the February 2008 general elections — 97 National Assembly seats. Nawaz Sharif's PML-N won 71 seats. Musharraf's PML-Q was decimated — 54 seats — a devastating verdict on his decade of rule.

The election was a referendum on Musharraf and the voters delivered a clear verdict: they wanted him gone. The PPP and PML-N formed a coalition government, their long rivalry briefly set aside by the shared imperative of restoring democratic governance and confronting the security crisis.

Yousuf Raza Gilani of the PPP was elected Prime Minister in March 2008. Asif Ali Zardari — widower of Benazir Bhutto, the most controversial figure in Pakistani politics — managed the party from behind the scenes until his election as President in September 2008.

Musharraf's Resignation: 18 August 2008

Facing impeachment proceedings initiated by the PPP-PML-N coalition, Musharraf resigned as President on 18 August 2008, addressing the nation in a lengthy televised speech in which he defended his record and expressed the hope that history would judge him kindly. He left Pakistan for London, then settled in Dubai.

Musharraf's resignation ended nine years of military rule and Pakistan's fourth period of direct military governance. He had arrived in 1999 promising accountability, economic reform, and a new Pakistan. He had delivered economic growth, private media, local government reform, and a partial nuclear détente with India. He had also delivered constitutional manipulation, judicial subordination, the Kargil adventure, the double game in Afghanistan, and ultimately an internal security crisis that his policies had created.

The Chief Justice Restored: Lawyers' Movement Triumph

In March 2009, under intense pressure from the lawyers' movement — which had marched on Islamabad in what became known as the Long March — Prime Minister Gilani announced the restoration of Chief Justice Iftikhar Chaudhry, who had been deposed by Musharraf in November 2007. The restoration was a landmark in Pakistani democratic history: civil society had forced a reversal of a government decision through sustained, nonviolent pressure.

The restored Supreme Court subsequently struck down the National Reconciliation Ordinance (NRO) that had dropped corruption cases against Benazir, Zardari, and hundreds of other politicians — a ruling with enormous implications for the PPP government whose leadership had benefited most from the NRO.

The Mumbai Attacks: November 2008

On 26 November 2008, ten Pakistani members of Lashkar-e-Taiba landed by boat in Mumbai, India, and conducted a series of coordinated attacks across the city over four days — targeting the Taj Mahal Hotel, Chhatrapati Shivaji Terminus, the Oberoi Trident Hotel, and a Jewish community

centre. 166 people were killed; one attacker was captured alive.

The Mumbai attacks brought India and Pakistan to the brink of their most serious crisis since 2001-02. Indian evidence — including the captured attacker's detailed account — pointed conclusively to LeT and to Pakistani soil as the origin of the attack. Pakistan initially denied involvement; eventually acknowledged that the attack had been planned on Pakistani territory and that the perpetrators were Pakistani.

Pakistan arrested some LeT figures and announced a trial. But the prosecution proceeded slowly and inconclusively — the case against the alleged mastermind Zakiur Rehman Lakhvi became a symbol of Pakistani justice's inability or unwillingness to hold LeT accountable. India suspended the composite dialogue. The peace process that had been building since 2003 was set back by years.

2009 The Swat Taliban; Operation Rah-e-Rast; Baitullah Mehsud Killed

Pakistan Turns Its Military Against the Domestic Taliban

The Swat Valley: Taliban Take a Tourist Paradise

The Swat Valley — once called the 'Switzerland of Pakistan' for its stunning mountain scenery and tourist industry — fell progressively under the control of the Tehrik-e-Nifaz-e-Shariat-e-Mohammadi (TNSM) and its leader Maulana Fazlullah through 2007-2009. Fazlullah's FM radio broadcasts — earning him the nickname 'Radio Mullah' — spread his extremist ideology across the valley while his fighters enforced their version of sharia through executions, floggings, and the destruction of girls' schools.

The Pakistani Army's initial response was inadequate — multiple agreements negotiated with the Taliban were broken, and the army appeared unwilling to commit the forces needed to clear the valley. The Swat crisis became a national humiliation: a beautiful and prosperous region within 200 kilometres of Islamabad was under Taliban control.

A peace deal signed in February 2009 — the Nizam-e-Adl Regulation that effectively ceded judicial authority in Swat to the Taliban's interpretation of sharia — was the low point. When a video emerged of a young woman being publicly flogged by Taliban members, national and international outrage was immediate and overwhelming. The peace deal collapsed and the army finally moved.

Operation Rah-e-Rast: The Military Reclaims Swat

In May 2009, the Pakistan Army launched Operation Rah-e-Rast ('Right Path') in Swat with overwhelming force — approximately 30,000 troops supported by helicopter gunships and artillery. Within weeks, the Taliban were pushed out of Swat's main towns. By July, the army declared the operation largely successful.

The military campaign displaced approximately 2.7 million civilians from Swat and surrounding areas in one of Pakistan's largest internal displacements since 1971. The camps that housed them were overwhelmed. International aid organisations and the Pakistani government scrambled to provide relief. The scale of the displacement demonstrated both the seriousness of the Taliban threat and the enormous human cost of military solutions.

The Swat operation was militarily successful and politically significant. It demonstrated that the Pakistan Army, when it chose to commit adequate resources and political will, could defeat the Taliban in a particular area. It also demonstrated the limits of military solutions without concurrent political and developmental programmes to address the conditions that had enabled the Taliban's rise.

Baitullah Mehsud Killed: August 2009

On 5 August 2009, a CIA drone strike killed Baitullah Mehsud — the founder and leader of the Pakistani Taliban (TTP) — in South Waziristan. Mehsud had been responsible for dozens of suicide bombings across Pakistan, including the assassination of Benazir Bhutto. His death was a significant intelligence and operational success that temporarily disrupted TTP command.

Mehsud was succeeded by Hakimullah Mehsud, who proved equally brutal and operationally effective. The drone programme — American CIA-operated unmanned aircraft strikes in FATA that

killed militants and civilians alike — was simultaneously one of the most effective counter-terrorism tools available and one of the most corrosive forces in Pakistani public opinion.

The drone programme was officially denied by the Pakistani government — which publicly condemned strikes that it had privately approved through a secret agreement with the CIA. This double-speak created enormous public anger when the arrangement became publicly known and further eroded the credibility of Pakistani democratic governance.

Pakistan's Armed Forces 2007-2015: The Army's War on Its Own Creation

From Reluctant to Committed — How the Military Finally Turned on the Taliban

The Ideological Challenge of Fighting Co-Religionists

The Pakistan Army faced an unprecedented ideological challenge in confronting the Taliban. For two decades, the military had cultivated jihadist ideology as a strategic tool. Officers had trained with the mujahideen. Religious education had been embedded in army culture during the Zia era. Soldiers were now asked to fight people who used the same religious vocabulary and cited the same theological authorities as their former allies.

Some soldiers refused; a small number surrendered to the Taliban. The army addressed the ideological challenge by reframing the TTP as 'Khwarij' — a classical Islamic term for rebels against legitimate Muslim authority — allowing soldiers to fight without the cognitive dissonance of fighting Islam itself. ISPR-produced video content and Friday sermons in army mosques reinforced this narrative consistently.

The army's 5,000+ casualties in FATA operations from 2007-2015 created an institutional stake in defeating the Taliban that had not existed when the operations began. An institution that has lost thousands of soldiers to an enemy develops a visceral commitment to defeating it. This psychological shift in the army's relationship to the Taliban was arguably more important than any operational development.

ISI, the Establishment, and the Limits of the Double Game

The ISI's maintenance of relationships with the Afghan Taliban and Haqqani Network while simultaneously fighting the Pakistani Taliban was the central strategic contradiction of this period. American officials documented it extensively; Pakistani officials denied it or explained it as necessary hedging.

The logic of the double game was consistent: Afghanistan's future remained uncertain; the Afghan Taliban were a potential lever of influence; abandoning them entirely would leave Pakistan without assets in a post-American Afghanistan dominated by India-friendly forces. The cost — continued attacks on American forces, Pakistan's diplomatic isolation, and the domestication of jihad that produced the TTP — was deemed acceptable.

The contradiction became increasingly untenable as the TTP's attacks on Pakistani civilians mounted. By the time of Operation Zarb-e-Azb in 2014, the security establishment had concluded that the domestic threat had reached a level that required comprehensive military action — even if that action still excluded the Afghan Taliban from its targeting.

2010 The Catastrophic Floods; PPP Governance Crisis; WikiLeaks Revelations

One-Fifth of Pakistan Underwater; the State at Its Most Vulnerable

The Great Floods of 2010: July–September

In the summer of 2010, Pakistan experienced the worst flooding in its recorded history. Unusually heavy monsoon rains — linked to the La Nina weather pattern and possibly to climate change — caused the Indus and its tributaries to burst their banks along virtually their entire length. At its peak, approximately one-fifth of Pakistan's total land area was inundated.

The human cost was staggering: approximately 1,800 people killed directly, 21 million displaced, 1.9 million homes damaged or destroyed, and vast areas of agricultural land rendered unproductive. Pakistan's cotton crop — the foundation of its textile export economy — was devastated. Sugar cane, wheat, and rice crops across Punjab, Sindh, and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa were destroyed. Economic losses were estimated at over $10 billion.

The international response was generous — $2.4 billion was pledged in aid — but the PPP government's disaster management was widely criticised. President Zardari infamously completed a European trip (including visiting his French chateau) while millions were underwater, generating outrage that came to symbolise his government's disconnection from ordinary Pakistanis' suffering.

The PPP Government's Governance Failures

The PPP government of Prime Minister Gilani and President Zardari (2008-2013) was characterised by macroeconomic deterioration and governance failure on a broad front. The fiscal deficit widened dramatically; inflation surged to over 20% at its peak in 2008-09; foreign exchange reserves declined; and the power sector 'circular debt' — the accumulating liabilities from unpaid electricity bills creating a chain of defaults — reached critical levels.

Electricity load-shedding, which had been manageable under Musharraf's economic boom years, became catastrophic under the PPP. Urban households faced 12-18 hours of daily power cuts; rural areas sometimes went without electricity for 20+ hours. Industrial production was severely affected. The government's failure to add generating capacity and its inability to enforce bill collection created an energy crisis that became one of the defining issues of Pakistani politics.

The Supreme Court under Chief Justice Chaudhry — restored through the lawyers' movement — became increasingly interventionist, taking suo motu notice of corruption cases, government failures, and constitutional questions. The NRO judgment struck down the immunity arrangement that had benefited Zardari and others. The court's activism was both a response to genuine governance failures and an overreach that blurred the separation of powers.

The WikiLeaks Cables: Pakistani Army's Double Game Exposed

The November 2010 release of American diplomatic cables by WikiLeaks included numerous dispatches from Islamabad that documented, in frank diplomatic language, American officials' assessments of Pakistani military and intelligence double-dealing. The cables documented ISI support for the Afghan Taliban's Quetta Shura, the army's protection of militant networks, and the gap between Pakistan's public commitments and private behaviour.

The cables were not surprising to anyone familiar with the situation, but their publication in the public domain forced a level of acknowledgment that had previously been diplomatically impossible. Pakistani officials condemned the leaks as a violation of sovereignty. American officials maintained that the leaks distorted context. But the essential picture — of a Pakistani security establishment that played a sophisticated double game in Afghanistan — was confirmed rather than contradicted by the cables.

2011 Bin Laden Killed in Abbottabad; Salala Attack; Raymond Davis

The Pakistan-America Alliance at Its Most Strained

The Raymond Davis Affair: January 2011

On 27 January 2011, Raymond Davis — an American CIA contractor — shot and killed two Pakistani men in Lahore who he claimed were attempting to rob him. A third Pakistani was killed by an American vehicle rushing to Davis's assistance. Davis was arrested by Pakistani police.

The case became a major diplomatic crisis. The United States claimed Davis had diplomatic immunity and demanded his release. Pakistan's courts held him while the immunity question was litigated. The families of the victims were eventually paid blood money in an arrangement brokered by the Pakistani government, and Davis was released in March 2011 and immediately flown out of Pakistan.

The Raymond Davis affair exposed the extent of CIA operations in Pakistan — Davis was eventually revealed to be running surveillance operations that the ISI had not been informed of — and generated massive public anger. It demonstrated the gap between the official US-Pakistan alliance and the actual intelligence relationship, which was marked by mutual suspicion and competing operations.

2 May 2011: Osama bin Laden Killed in Abbottabad

In the early hours of 2 May 2011, American Navy SEALs of SEAL Team 6 flew by helicopter from Afghanistan into Pakistan's Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, landing in a compound in Abbottabad — a garrison city that housed the Pakistan Military Academy. They killed Osama bin Laden, the founder of al-Qaeda and the world's most wanted terrorist, in the compound where he had apparently been living for years.

The Abbottabad raid was conducted without informing Pakistani authorities — a deliberate decision by the Obama administration based on concerns that prior notification would compromise the operation. Pakistani military radar did not detect the helicopters. Pakistan's air defences did not respond. Pakistani security forces arrived at the scene only after the SEALs had departed.

The revelation that bin Laden had been living in a large compound near Pakistan's premier military academy for years raised questions that Pakistan could not satisfactorily answer: either the ISI knew bin Laden was there (complicity) or it did not (incompetence). Pakistani officials chose incompetence over complicity as the lesser embarrassment. Either explanation was devastating for Pakistan's credibility as a security partner.

The raid produced the most severe rupture in US-Pakistan relations since the Pressler Amendment. American public opinion was furious that an ally had apparently been sheltering the September 11 mastermind. Pakistani public opinion was furious at the violation of sovereignty. The ISI-CIA relationship, already strained by the Davis affair, deteriorated sharply.

"We got him. Justice has been done."

— US President Barack Obama, announcing the killing of Osama bin Laden, 2 May 2011

The Salala Attack: November 2011

On 26 November 2011, American aircraft attacked two Pakistani military checkposts on the Afghan-Pakistan border at Salala in Mohmand Agency, killing 24 Pakistani soldiers. The attack — which the United States attributed to a miscommunication during a joint operation — was the most lethal incident in US-Pakistan military relations since 2001.

Pakistan's response was severe: it closed the NATO supply routes through Pakistani territory to Afghanistan — routes through which approximately 40% of NATO's Afghan supplies had been transiting. The routes remained closed for seven months, causing serious logistical difficulties for NATO and imposing hundreds of millions of dollars in additional costs. Pakistan also vacated the Shamsi air base that the United States had been using for drone operations.

The Salala attack and its aftermath represented the nadir of US-Pakistan relations in the post-2001 period. An uneasy reconciliation was achieved in July 2012 when Pakistan reopened the supply routes following an American expression of regret — but the fundamental tensions in the relationship had not been resolved.

Pakistan's Foreign Relations 2008-2015: Managing the Triangle

America, India, and China — and the Impossible Balancing Act

The AfPak Strategy and Escalating US Pressure

President Obama's administration developed an 'AfPak' strategy treating Afghanistan and Pakistan as a single strategic theatre — a more honest acknowledgment of regional dynamics than previous American frameworks. American pressure on Pakistan intensified: demands to act against the Haqqani Network, threats to reduce aid, and the expanded drone programme despite Pakistani objections.

The bin Laden raid and the Salala attack brought the relationship to its lowest point. By 2011-12, senior American officials openly questioned whether Pakistan was a partner or an adversary. The relationship survived because both sides needed each other: America needed Pakistan's supply routes and intelligence; Pakistan needed American aid, weapons, and the legitimacy of American partnership against India.

India-Pakistan: The Mumbai Freeze and Slow Thaw

The Mumbai attacks of November 2008 froze the India-Pakistan dialogue for years. India's demand — prosecute those responsible — was not met to Indian satisfaction. The case against LeT commander Zakiur Rehman Lakhvi proceeded at glacial pace through Pakistani courts.

Nawaz Sharif's election in 2013 created a new opportunity. His invitation to Modi for his oath-taking ceremony and subsequent meetings generated optimism about a potential breakthrough. But the military's ability to veto foreign policy through action — a militant attack, an intelligence operation — meant civilian-led improvements could always be disrupted. The business logic for normalisation was overwhelming; the security establishment's institutional interest in managed hostility prevailed.

The China Relationship Deepens: From Alliance to Integration

The China-Pakistan relationship deepened qualitatively through this decade from strategic partnership to comprehensive embrace. CPEC was the most visible symbol, but the relationship was broader: Chinese military equipment replaced American systems cut off after the Pressler Amendment and post-2011 tensions; Chinese investment filled the gap left by Western capital; and Chinese diplomatic support at the UN Security Council provided crucial protection.

The JF-17 Thunder fighter aircraft — jointly developed by Pakistan Aeronautical Complex and China's Chengdu Aircraft Corporation — became the backbone of Pakistan Air Force as F-16 spare parts became harder to obtain. Chinese submarine and naval vessel sales deepened the military relationship. The Karakoram Highway was being upgraded to handle CPEC freight traffic. China had become Pakistan's indispensable partner in a way that not even the Cold War-era American alliance had been.

2012 PTI's Rise; Malala Shot; Supreme Court Dismisses PM Gilani

Political Turbulence and the World's Most Famous Teenager

Imran Khan and PTI: From Fringe to Force

Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf — Imran Khan's party, founded in 1996 but politically marginal for over a decade — emerged as a genuine mass force through 2011-2012. A massive rally in Lahore's Minto Park in October 2011, attended by hundreds of thousands, announced PTI's arrival as a political phenomenon capable of challenging the PPP-PML-N duopoly.

Imran Khan's appeal was concentrated in the urban middle class, the diaspora, and the young — groups that felt contempt for both the PPP and PML-N as corrupt dynastic parties that had failed Pakistan. His message — anti-corruption, anti-drone, anti-American, pro-Islam, pro-rule of law — was a populist synthesis that crossed ideological lines. His personal credibility from the Shaukat Khanum Hospital and the 1992 World Cup gave him moral authority that career politicians lacked.

PTI's rise represented a generational shift in Pakistani politics. Young Pakistanis who had grown up with private television, social media, and the internet were a new political constituency less deferential to traditional patron-client politics. They wanted clean government and national dignity — and Imran Khan offered both, at least rhetorically.

9 October 2012: Malala Yousafzai Shot

On 9 October 2012, a Taliban gunman boarded a school bus in the Swat Valley and shot 15-year-old Malala Yousafzai in the head at close range. Malala had been a prominent advocate for girls' education since the age of eleven, blogging anonymously for the BBC about life under the Taliban in Swat and subsequently becoming internationally known after the military operation restored government control.

Malala survived — she was airlifted to a military hospital, then transferred to Birmingham, England, for treatment. Her survival and subsequent advocacy for girls' education made her one of the most famous young people in the world; she received the Nobel Peace Prize in 2014.

The attack on Malala provoked near-universal condemnation in Pakistan and internationally. Even political figures and media personalities who had previously been equivocal about Taliban violence condemned this attack on a child. The TTP's claim of responsibility and their threat to try again demonstrated the depth of the extremist commitment to preventing girls' education.

The Supreme Court Dismisses PM Gilani: June 2012

Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani was dismissed by the Supreme Court in June 2012, convicted of contempt for refusing to write a letter to Swiss authorities requesting the reopening of corruption cases against President Zardari. The conviction — the first-ever conviction of a sitting Prime Minister by Pakistan's Supreme Court — raised profound constitutional questions about the relationship between the judiciary and the executive.

Critics argued the Supreme Court had overreached — that a Prime Minister's refusal to follow a court order was a political and constitutional matter, not a criminal one; and that using the contempt mechanism to dismiss an elected Prime Minister was a form of judicial coup. Supporters argued that no one — including the Prime Minister — was above the law. Raja Pervez Ashraf replaced

Gilani as PM.

2013 Historic Democratic Transfer of Power; Nawaz's Third Term; TTP Violence

Pakistan Achieves Its First Civilian-to-Civilian Power Transfer

The May 2013 Elections: A Democratic Milestone

The general election of 11 May 2013 was the most significant in Pakistan's history. For the first time since independence, power was transferred from one elected civilian government to another — the PPP completing its full five-year term and peacefully handing over to its successors after losing the election. This was a milestone that sixty-six years of Pakistani history had never produced.

Nawaz Sharif's PML-N won 166 National Assembly seats — the largest tally by any party since Nawaz's own landslide in 1997. PTI finished third nationally but came second in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, where it formed the provincial government — its first experience of governance. The PPP was devastated in Punjab and nationally, winning only 42 seats.

The election campaign was marked by unprecedented Taliban violence against PPP, ANP, and MQM candidates — the so-called 'Tehreek-e-Taliban election ban' on secular parties. Dozens of candidates and workers were killed in attacks. The TTP's ability to selectively terrorise certain parties while leaving others (particularly PTI and PML-N, which had been softer in their criticism of the Taliban) largely unmolested raised uncomfortable questions about the even-handedness of the security apparatus.

Nawaz Sharif's Third Government: Agenda and Constraints

Nawaz Sharif's third government began with an ambitious agenda: resolving the energy crisis that was strangling the economy, improving relations with India, managing the American relationship post-bin Laden, and addressing the Taliban insurgency. The constraints were equally formidable: a fiscal deficit at dangerous levels, foreign exchange reserves falling, electricity shortages causing 12-18 hours of daily load-shedding, and a security situation that remained deeply threatening.

Nawaz made an early and significant diplomatic initiative by inviting Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh to his oath-taking ceremony — the first time an Indian Prime Minister had attended a Pakistani inaugural function. The gesture was warmly received internationally and reflected Nawaz's genuine interest in improving India-Pakistan relations, driven partly by his business background and understanding of the economic benefits of regional trade.

TTP Violence: A Country Under Siege

Through 2013, Pakistani cities and public spaces continued to be struck by devastating Taliban attacks. Suicide bombings at mosques, markets, courts, and army installations were a near-daily occurrence. The attack on the All Saints Church in Peshawar in September 2013 — which killed 127 Christians — was one of the deadliest ever attacks on Pakistan's Christian minority.

The total death toll from terrorism in Pakistan reached its peak in 2013, with over 3,000 civilians and security personnel killed. Pakistan had become one of the most dangerous countries in the world, with Taliban attacks in the Tribal Areas, targeted killings of Shia professionals in Karachi and Quetta, and periodic spectacular attacks in Islamabad, Lahore, and other major cities.

Nawaz Sharif's government initially pursued negotiations with the TTP — a position consistent with his longstanding preference for dialogue over military action. The negotiations went nowhere: the

TTP demanded the Pakistani government abandon its alliance with the United States, implement sharia law, and release thousands of prisoners — demands no government could accept.

Pakistani Society 2008-2015: Social Media, Women, and Urban Transformation

A Young, Connected, and Deeply Polarised Nation

Social Media and the Political Revolution

The rapid adoption of social media — Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and WhatsApp — through this period transformed Pakistani political culture. Pakistan had over 30 million Facebook users by 2015. PTI built much of its political support through Facebook and Twitter, pioneering social media political mobilisation in South Asia. The 2014 dharna was organised and sustained largely through social media platforms.

Social media gave voice to constituencies previously excluded from mainstream discourse: women, minorities, the young, and the geographically marginalised. Citizen journalism — mobile phone videos of police brutality, military operations, and political events — supplemented and sometimes contradicted official narratives. The government's response evolved from confusion to attempted control: YouTube was blocked 2012-2016, and Twitter was periodically restricted.

Women's Progress: Education and the Professions

Female literacy reached approximately 47% by 2015 — dramatically higher than the 16% of 1985. Women's university enrolment was approaching parity with men in urban institutions. Hina Rabbani Khar as Pakistan's first female Foreign Minister (2011-2013) represented growing professional representation. Private television's normalisation of women presenters, hosts, and journalists was shifting cultural norms in urban areas.

Yet Malala's shooting illustrated that women's education remained actively contested in significant areas. Honour killings continued at hundreds annually. Forced marriages and domestic violence remained widespread. The Malala Nobel Prize (2014) was celebrated globally; in Pakistan, reaction was mixed — some Pakistani commentators accused her of being a Western pawn, illustrating the deep division between those proud of her achievement and those who resented her international advocacy.

Urbanisation and the Middle Class Explosion

Pakistan's urban population crossed 40% of the total for the first time in this decade. Karachi passed 14 million inhabitants, making it one of the world's megacities. Lahore exceeded 10 million. Faisalabad, Rawalpindi-Islamabad, Gujranwala, and Multa were all multi-million population cities.

The urban middle class — professionals, small business owners, service sector employees — was expanding and increasingly politically assertive. This class formed the social base for PTI's rise, for the lawyers' movement, and for the media revolution. Its aspirations — for meritocracy over patronage, for rule of law over power, for dignity over servility — were reshaping Pakistan's political culture even as the feudal and patrimonial structures of rural Pakistan persisted.

2014 Operation Zarb-e-Azb; PTI's Sit-in; APS Massacre

The Year Pakistan Finally Fought Back — and Suffered Its Greatest Tragedy

Operation Zarb-e-Azb: June 2014

On 15 June 2014, the Pakistan Army launched Operation Zarb-e-Azb ('Sharp and Cutting Strike') in North Waziristan — the first comprehensive military operation in the tribal agency that had been the primary sanctuary for the Pakistani Taliban, al-Qaeda, the Haqqani Network, and various other militant groups.

The trigger was a brazen attack on Karachi's Jinnah International Airport in June 2014 by TTP militants armed with rocket launchers and automatic weapons, who killed 28 people including all ten attackers. The attack on Pakistan's largest civilian airport was the final provocation that overcome the military's reluctance to move comprehensively against North Waziristan.

Zarb-e-Azb was the largest and most consequential military operation in FATA's history. Approximately 100,000 troops were deployed. The army systematically cleared towns and villages, destroying militant infrastructure and killing hundreds of fighters. The operation displaced approximately one million civilians — the North Waziristan IDPs — in yet another massive humanitarian crisis.

By the end of 2014, the army had disrupted the TTP's operational capacity significantly — attacks in major cities declined. But the operation did not distinguish clearly between the Pakistani Taliban (enemies) and the Afghan Taliban including the Haqqani Network (still protected assets). Critics noted that the army's unwillingness to target all militant groups equally limited the operation's strategic value.

PTI's Dharna: The August 2014 Sit-in

In August 2014, Imran Khan led Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf in a 'dharna' (sit-in) in Islamabad — occupying the main arterial road and a square near Parliament for 126 days. PTI alleged massive rigging in the 2013 elections and demanded Nawaz Sharif's resignation and a judicial commission to investigate the polls.

The dharna was a defining moment in PTI's political evolution. It demonstrated Imran Khan's ability to mobilise hundreds of thousands of supporters — urban middle class, diaspora, and youth — in sustained political action. It paralysed the Nawaz government's legislative agenda and created a governance crisis at a time when Pakistan was already under severe security pressure.

The dharna also raised questions about civil-military relations. The army's public neutrality masked what many analysts believed was at least tacit encouragement of PTI's pressure on a civilian government that the military found difficult. The army's role in eventually facilitating the dharna's end further fed speculation about civil-military dynamics.

16 December 2014: The Army Public School Massacre

On 16 December 2014 — the 43rd anniversary of Pakistan's surrender in the 1971 war — Pakistani Taliban gunmen attacked the Army Public School in Peshawar, killing 132 children and 9 staff members. It was the deadliest terrorist attack in Pakistan's history.

The gunmen, wearing suicide vests, entered the school and systematically executed children in classrooms and the auditorium. Children hid under desks; teachers were burned alive in front of their students. The youngest victim was eight years old. The attack lasted approximately eight hours before the building was secured.

The APS massacre produced a national trauma unlike any previous event. Pakistan went into mourning — schools closed, flags flew at half-mast, and ordinary Pakistanis from all provinces expressed grief and fury that cut across every political and social division. The attack was a TTP response to Zarb-e-Azb — deliberate targeting of children of military families to exact revenge and demoralise the army.

The massacre produced the National Action Plan — a 20-point counter-terrorism programme agreed by all political parties and the military that included military courts for terrorist trials, curbs on hate speech, choking of terrorist financing, and action against madrassas spreading extremist ideology. Its implementation was uneven but it represented the most comprehensive political consensus on counter-terrorism in Pakistan's history.

"My children, I will not let your blood go in vain. Pakistan will eliminate the Taliban and their facilitators."

— Army Chief General Raheel Sharif at the APS massacre site, December 2014

Pakistan in 2014: Security Statistics

APS attack deaths: 141 (132 children) | Zarb-e-Azb launched: 15 June 2014 | North Waziristan IDPs: ~1 million | Terrorist attacks in Pakistan in 2014: est. 1,700+ | National Action Plan: adopted 25 December 2014

2015 Post-APS Counter-Terrorism; CPEC Launches; Political Tensions Continue

Pakistan Turns a Corner on Terrorism While Deepening China Partnership

Military Courts and the National Action Plan

The National Action Plan's most controversial provision was the establishment of military courts to try terrorist cases — a departure from the civilian judicial process that human rights organisations condemned. The Twenty-First Amendment to the constitution, passed in January 2015, created this framework for a two-year period.

Proponents argued that civilian courts were too slow, too vulnerable to witness intimidation, and too poorly equipped to handle terrorism cases that involved classified intelligence evidence. The military courts rapidly processed and sentenced dozens of convicted militants, including executions. By the end of their two-year mandate, they had tried hundreds of cases.

The broader NAP implementation was uneven. Action on hate speech and madrassa reform was halfhearted. The distinction between 'good Taliban' (Afghan Taliban and the Haqqani Network, protected for strategic reasons) and 'bad Taliban' (TTP, actively fought) remained embedded in the security establishment's thinking. The fundamental problem — a security apparatus that maintained some militant relationships while fighting others — was not resolved.

The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor Launches

April 2015 marked the formal launch of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) — the multi-billion dollar infrastructure programme that would transform Pakistan's economic and strategic landscape. Chinese President Xi Jinping visited Islamabad and announced $46 billion in planned investments — subsequently revised upward to $62 billion — covering energy projects, roads, railways, the Gwadar port, and industrial zones.

CPEC was a transformative proposition for Pakistan: the country desperately needed infrastructure investment, and China was offering it at scale and speed that no other investor could match. The energy projects — coal, gas, and eventually renewable power plants — promised to address Pakistan's chronic electricity shortage within years. The road and railway connections would reduce transport costs and integrate Pakistan's regions more effectively.

CPEC also deepened Pakistan's strategic dependence on China and its entanglement in China's 'Belt and Road Initiative' geopolitical project. The terms of CPEC agreements — the guaranteed return rates for Chinese investors, the dollar-denominated contracts, and the routing of economic benefits — were criticised for favouring Chinese interests over Pakistani development. Baloch nationalists protested that CPEC's Gwadar component was being developed without adequate local consultation or benefit.

Karachi Operations: Targeting MQM and Criminal Networks

The Rangers operation in Karachi, which had been ongoing since 2013 under the Rangers and the PPP provincial government's direction, was intensified under a new mandate from Nawaz Sharif's government in 2015. The operation targeted not only the TTP's urban networks but explicitly the MQM — still the dominant political force in Karachi — whose paramilitary wing was accused of targeted killings, extortion, and the maintenance of torture cells.

The operation produced results in terms of reduced violence: Karachi's murder rate, which had peaked at over 2,000 annually in 2013, declined dramatically. But the methodology — Rangers raids, extrajudicial killings of alleged criminals and militants, enforced disappearances — continued to raise serious human rights concerns.

Altaf Hussain's relationship with the Pakistani state deteriorated further in 2015. His speeches from London became increasingly incendiary, and he was eventually investigated by British police for incitement. The MQM's stranglehold on Karachi — built over three decades of ethnic politics and political violence — was weakening under sustained security pressure.

The Economy in 2015: Recovery and Structural Weakness

By 2015, Pakistan's economy was showing genuine improvement from the depths of the 2008-2013 PPP years. The fiscal deficit had been reduced through an IMF programme. Foreign exchange reserves had recovered to comfortable levels, partly due to falling international oil prices (Pakistan was a major oil importer). GDP growth was approaching 5%. The stock exchange (KSE-100) was one of the best-performing in Asia.

The improvement was real but fragile and unevenly distributed. Electricity load-shedding continued, though at somewhat reduced levels. Tax collection remained chronically insufficient — Pakistan's tax-to-GDP ratio remained among the lowest in the world. The CPEC investments were promising but would take years to come online. The energy sector circular debt — accumulated liabilities from unpaid bills in the generation and distribution chain — remained an unresolved fiscal time-bomb.

Pakistan in 2015: Statistical Snapshot

Population: ~189 million | PM: Nawaz Sharif | President: Mamnoon Hussain | GDP growth: ~4.7% | CPEC announced: $46 billion Chinese investment | Terrorism deaths in Pakistan: declining from 2013-14 peak | Karachi murder rate: dramatically reduced from 2013 peak | APS anniversary: national day of mourning declared

The Pakistani Taliban 2007–2015: Pakistan's War Against Its Own Creation

How the Security Establishment's Strategic Assets Became Existential Threats

The TTP's Formation and Ideology

The Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) was formally constituted at a shura (council) in December 2007, uniting the major militant groups operating in FATA under the leadership of Baitullah Mehsud. The TTP was distinct from the Afghan Taliban in a crucial way: while the Afghan Taliban focused their violence on Afghanistan and the American-led coalition, the TTP directed their jihad primarily against the Pakistani state itself.

The TTP's ideology combined several elements: opposition to Pakistan's alliance with the United States in the War on Terror; rejection of the Pakistani state's democratic constitution as un-Islamic; Pashtun tribal grievances against military operations in FATA; and the global jihadist ideology of al-Qaeda, which provided theological justification for attacking Muslim governments deemed to be apostates.

The TTP's emergence was a direct consequence of Pakistan's twenty-five year investment in jihadist infrastructure. The madrassas that had trained the mujahideen, the ISI networks that had organised the Afghan jihad, and the weapons that had flooded the tribal areas had created the conditions for a domestic insurgency. When Pakistan joined the War on Terror and conducted military operations in FATA, these structures were redirected against the Pakistani state.

The Drone Programme: Effective, Controversial, Corrosive

The American CIA's drone programme — armed unmanned aerial vehicles striking targets in Pakistan's tribal areas — was one of the most effective and most controversial counter-terrorism tools of this decade. The programme killed hundreds of high-value targets including Baitullah Mehsud (2009), Hakimullah Mehsud (2013), and numerous al-Qaeda operatives.

It also killed civilians — estimates of civilian casualties ranged widely, with Pakistani government figures suggesting higher numbers than American official counts. The effect on Pakistani public opinion was devastating: polls consistently showed that 70-80% of Pakistanis opposed drone strikes, seeing them as a violation of sovereignty and an indiscriminate killing machine regardless of their actual effectiveness.

The Pakistani government's double position — secretly approving drone strikes while publicly condemning them — destroyed public trust when it became known. This hypocrisy made it impossible for the government to build public support for the counter-terrorism campaign it was simultaneously conducting. The drone programme was effective at killing individuals; it was counterproductive at building the domestic consensus needed for a successful counter-insurgency.

The Haqqani Network: Protected Asset, Global Problem

The Haqqani Network — based in North Waziristan and conducting devastating attacks in Afghanistan against American and NATO forces, the Afghan government, and civilian targets — was the most visible symbol of Pakistan's continuing strategic contradiction. American intelligence documented that the ISI maintained an active support relationship with the Haqqanis; Admiral Mike Mullen, Chairman of the US Joint Chiefs, famously described the Haqqani Network as a 'veritable

arm' of the ISI.

Pakistan denied the characterisation while declining to conduct military operations against the Haqqanis. The logic was consistent with the 'strategic assets' doctrine: Afghanistan would eventually need to be managed after the American withdrawal, and the Haqqanis were a lever of Pakistani influence. The cost — continued American casualties, sustained damage to the US-Pakistan relationship, and eventual inclusion of the Haqqani Network in international terrorist designations — was accepted as the price of maintaining strategic flexibility.

Civil-Military Relations 2008–2015: Democracy's Persistent Subordination

Three Governments, One Constant: The Military's Political Primacy

The Memogate Scandal: 2011

In October 2011, a Pakistani-American businessman Mansoor Ijaz published an article alleging that Pakistan's Ambassador to the United States, Husain Haqqani, had asked him to deliver a secret memo to Admiral Mullen seeking American help in preventing a military coup after the bin Laden raid. The memo allegedly offered concessions on Pakistan's nuclear programme and Afghanistan policy in exchange for American pressure on the Pakistani military.

The Memogate scandal convulsed Pakistani politics. Ambassador Haqqani — a longtime critic of the military's political role and an advocate for civilian supremacy — was forced to resign and returned to Pakistan where he was investigated for treason. He eventually left Pakistan under pressure, with the treason case pending.

Memogate illustrated the asymmetric power relationship between the civilian government and the military: the military could use a disputed allegation to force out a senior civilian official, while the civilian government had no equivalent leverage over military officers. The incident demonstrated that even in the democratic period, the military's institutional interests could override civilian authority on matters touching military prerogatives.

Dawn Leaks and the Media-Military Nexus: 2016 Context

The period 2013-2015 saw increasing civil-military tensions under Nawaz Sharif's third government as the Prime Minister attempted to reassert civilian authority over foreign policy — particularly the India relationship and the management of militant groups that the army regarded as its exclusive domain.

The army's public relations apparatus — Inter Services Public Relations (ISPR) — had become a sophisticated media operation, managing Pakistan's narrative on security issues through press releases, social media, and relationships with journalists. Reporters who questioned the military's narrative faced professional consequences ranging from loss of access to more serious pressures.

The tension between civilian authority and military autonomy — present throughout Pakistan's history — was being managed rather than resolved in this period. Nawaz Sharif's government was more assertive about civilian prerogatives than its predecessors, but the army retained its effective veto on foreign policy and security decisions.

The Judiciary's Expanding Role

Chief Justice Iftikhar Chaudhry's Supreme Court — restored in 2009 and operating until his retirement in December 2013 — took an increasingly activist role in Pakistani politics. The court's suo motu jurisdiction — the power to take up cases on its own initiative — was used extensively to address government corruption, missing persons cases, environmental issues, and constitutional questions.

The court's activism was both celebrated and criticised. It was celebrated for addressing governance failures that elected governments had ignored and for asserting constitutional principles against executive power. It was criticised for judicial overreach — substituting judicial for

legislative and executive judgment on policy questions, and for the Chief Justice's alleged personalisation of judicial power.

The dismissal of Prime Minister Gilani, the NRO judgment, and the court's interventions in the Karachi violence, environmental cases, and constitutional questions all raised genuine questions about the appropriate scope of judicial power in a parliamentary democracy. Pakistan had the same fundamental challenge in the judiciary as in the military: institutions of state that had expanded their role beyond constitutional limits, partly because civilian government had historically been so weak.

Pakistan's Economy 2008–2015: From Crisis to Partial Recovery

The Fiscal Cost of Governance Failure and the Promise of CPEC

The PPP's Economic Legacy: Near-Collapse

The PPP government of 2008-2013 presided over the worst sustained economic performance since the 1971 separation. GDP growth averaged barely 3% — below population growth, meaning per capita income stagnated. Inflation peaked above 20% in 2008-09 before declining. The fiscal deficit was consistently high, financed by expensive domestic borrowing that crowded out private investment.

The power sector was the most visible failure. The circular debt — accumulated at approximately Rs 60 billion per month — required repeated government bailouts. Load-shedding of 12-18 hours daily in urban areas and 20+ hours in rural areas destroyed industrial productivity and public tolerance. Pakistan's industrial competitiveness was severely damaged as businesses fled to countries with reliable power.

By 2013, Pakistan was again in a balance of payments crisis — the IMF was engaged for the twelfth time in Pakistan's history. Foreign exchange reserves were critically low. The rupee was under severe pressure. Nawaz Sharif inherited an economy in distress.

PML-N's Economic Management: Stabilisation and Growth

Nawaz Sharif's economic team — led by Finance Minister Ishaq Dar — pursued an IMF-supported stabilisation programme that gradually restored macroeconomic stability. The fiscal deficit was reduced; foreign exchange reserves were rebuilt through a combination of falling oil prices, growing remittances, and commercial borrowing; and GDP growth recovered toward 5%.

The government's energy programme — accelerated under CPEC from 2015 — began adding generating capacity. New power plants were connected to the grid. Load-shedding hours declined, improving industrial productivity and public sentiment. The government's flagship Metro Bus projects in Lahore and Rawalpindi-Islamabad provided visible urban infrastructure improvements.

Critics noted that the recovery was built partly on Chinese CPEC investment that would require repayment, on remittances that were structurally dependent on Gulf economic conditions, and on a cyclical improvement in the external environment. The structural problems — low tax collection, energy sector inefficiency, education deficit — were being managed rather than solved.

Social Development: Progress Too Slow

Pakistan's social indicators improved through this decade but too slowly to satisfy the demands of a rapidly growing population. Literacy rates reached approximately 58% by 2015 — up from 38% in 1995 — but still among the lowest in South Asia. Female literacy lagged significantly behind male. Educational quality in government schools remained poor.

Child mortality rates declined as immunisation programmes improved and access to basic health services expanded in some areas. But Pakistan remained one of only two countries (with Afghanistan) where polio was still endemic — the vaccination campaign hampered by Taliban attacks on vaccination teams and religious misinformation about the vaccine.

The telecommunications revolution continued to transform everyday life. Mobile phone penetration reached 70% by 2015; smartphone adoption was growing rapidly; and mobile banking and payment services were beginning to reach previously unbanked populations. The digital divide between urban and rural, male and female, remained significant but was narrowing.

Balochistan 2006-2015: Insurgency, Resources, and CPEC

Pakistan's Largest and Most Troubled Province Remains Alienated

The Post-Bugti Insurgency

The killing of Nawab Akbar Bugti in August 2006 transformed the Baloch insurgency from a manageable security problem into a sustained conflict that threatened the legitimacy of Pakistani state authority in the province. Baloch nationalist organisations — the Baloch Liberation Army (BLA), Baloch Republican Army (BRA), and others — intensified attacks on gas pipelines, electricity infrastructure, security forces, and non-Baloch settlers.

The security forces' response involved targeted killings and enforced disappearances of suspected Baloch activists — a policy that HRCP documented extensively and that the Supreme Court repeatedly questioned. Hundreds of Baloch activists and young men were abducted by security forces and never formally charged or produced before courts. Their 'mutilated bodies' — a term that entered Pakistani political discourse — were found across Balochistan.

The enforced disappearances became a political crisis when families organised protests in front of the Supreme Court and before television cameras. Mama Qadeer Baloch — whose son was among the disappeared — led a long march from Quetta to Islamabad in 2013-14, bringing Baloch grievances to national attention. The march received significant media coverage and demonstrated that even in the age of the Taliban's domination of security discourse, Balochistan's crisis had not been forgotten.

CPEC in Balochistan: Promise and Controversy

The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor's most strategically significant component was its western route through Balochistan, terminating at Gwadar port on the Arabian Sea. For the Pakistani military and government, CPEC represented Balochistan's development opportunity — a transformative infrastructure investment that would bring roads, electricity, and economic activity to the province's long-neglected interior.

Baloch nationalists and many local people were deeply sceptical. They pointed to the pattern established by the Sui gas fields — Balochistan had been generating natural gas revenue for Pakistan since 1952, yet remained Pakistan's least developed province. Would CPEC be different? Who would benefit from Gwadar's port — Chinese companies, Punjabi businesspeople, or Baloch communities?

Chinese workers on CPEC projects became targets for militant attacks — the BLA and other groups argued that Chinese investment was economic colonialism. The army deployed thousands of troops to protect CPEC projects, creating a heavy military presence in an already militarised province. The contradiction between CPEC's development promise and its security requirements was a microcosm of Balochistan's fundamental dilemma.

Pakistan's Nuclear Posture 2007-2015: Asia's Fastest Growing Arsenal

Deterrence, Doctrine, and the Dangers of Tactical Nuclear Weapons

Expansion of the Nuclear Arsenal

Pakistan's nuclear weapons programme expanded significantly through this decade. Estimates of Pakistan's warhead count grew from approximately 60 in 2007 to over 100 by 2015, with some estimates reaching 120-130. Pakistan was assessed by the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists and other monitoring organisations as expanding its arsenal at a faster rate than any other nuclear power.

The expansion was driven by Pakistan's assessment of India's growing conventional military capabilities — particularly India's 'Cold Start' doctrine, which envisaged rapid, limited conventional strikes across the international border to punish Pakistan for sponsoring terrorism without triggering nuclear escalation. Pakistan's response was to develop tactical nuclear weapons — short-range Nasr missiles capable of delivering nuclear warheads on the battlefield — to deter Indian conventional incursions at the battalion and brigade level.

The development of tactical nuclear weapons lowered the nuclear threshold in ways that alarmed international security analysts. If Pakistani commanders might use nuclear weapons against Indian military formations crossing into Pakistani territory in the early stages of a conflict, the distinction between nuclear and conventional war was dangerously blurred.

Nuclear Security: Fears of Theft or Extremist Capture

Pakistan's nuclear programme faced a unique security challenge in this period: the Taliban insurgency raised the possibility that militants might attempt to seize or sabotage nuclear facilities. American officials expressed concerns — sometimes publicly — about the security of Pakistan's nuclear arsenal given the security situation in FATA and the wider country.

Pakistan strongly and repeatedly asserted the security of its arsenal: multi-layered physical protection, personnel reliability programmes, and command-and-control systems that were genuinely sophisticated. The Strategic Plans Division, which managed Pakistan's nuclear programme, maintained that the weapons were secure. American experts who examined Pakistani nuclear security arrangements came away generally reassured, though publicly maintaining concerns for their own political purposes.

The 2009 fall of Swat — a large settled district within 200km of Islamabad — briefly raised fears about the Taliban's ability to advance toward the capital. Pakistani officials were quick to note that nuclear facilities were not in the Taliban's path. But the episode illustrated that the threat environment was genuinely novel in the history of nuclear proliferation.

Energy Crisis: The Defining Economic Challenge of the Decade

Load-Shedding, Circular Debt, and the Race to Add Capacity

The Anatomy of the Energy Crisis

Pakistan's electricity crisis — chronic shortages requiring daily load-shedding of 12-18 hours in urban areas and up to 22 hours in rural areas at the peak in 2012-13 — was the most visceral governance failure of this period. Its causes were structural and long-accumulated: insufficient generating capacity, transmission losses from ageing infrastructure, theft from distribution networks, inability to enforce bill collection, and the circular debt that prevented power producers from receiving payment.

The circular debt worked as follows: electricity consumers and the government did not pay their electricity bills to distribution companies; distribution companies could not pay generation companies; generation companies could not buy fuel; power plants ran below capacity; load-shedding increased; consumers became less willing to pay for unreliable service. By 2012-13 the circular debt had accumulated to over Rs 500 billion — a sum requiring periodic government bailouts that simply shifted the problem without resolving it.

The economic cost of the energy crisis was enormous. Industrial production was severely affected — factories running backup generators faced costs 3-4 times the grid tariff. Businesses relocated to other countries. Investment was deterred. The manufacturing sector's competitiveness was destroyed. Economists estimated that Pakistan's GDP growth was depressed by 2-3 percentage points annually due to the energy crisis.

CPEC's Energy Component: The Solution Arrives

CPEC's energy programme — the most immediate priority within the broader infrastructure corridor — promised to add approximately 10,000 megawatts of generating capacity within five years. Coal plants at Port Qasim and Hub, gas plants, and eventually renewable energy projects were contracted under the CPEC framework.

The energy projects moved faster than almost any other CPEC component, driven by Chinese contracting capacity and the urgency of Pakistan's electricity shortage. By 2018, significant new capacity was coming online and load-shedding was declining dramatically. The CPEC energy solution was the most politically popular achievement of Nawaz Sharif's government.

The cost, however, was high: the CPEC energy contracts provided Chinese investors with guaranteed capacity payments and dollar-denominated returns that would create long-term fiscal obligations. When the power was there but consumers could not afford the new higher tariffs, the circular debt problem was replaced by a capacity payment problem. Pakistan had solved one energy problem and created another.

Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Under PTI 2013-2015: Governance in Practice

What Happened When Imran Khan's Party Actually Had to Govern

KP's PTI Government: Early Reforms

Khyber Pakhtunkhwa was the testing ground for PTI's governance philosophy. The party that had campaigned on ending corruption, improving education and health, and rebuilding institutional integrity now had to deliver in a province battered by Taliban violence, floods, and decades of under-investment.

The KP government under Chief Minister Pervez Khattak launched several genuine reforms in its first two years: a school education reform programme that deployed inspectors to monitor teacher attendance and published attendance data publicly; a police reform initiative that attempted to insulate the provincial police from political interference; and an afforestation programme (the 'Billion Tree Tsunami') that received international recognition.

KP's governance record was mixed. The education reforms showed measurable improvement in enrolment and teacher attendance. The police reforms were partially implemented. But the province remained severely underfunded, economically depressed, and under acute security pressure from Taliban violence. PTI's KP government was a qualified success — better than its predecessors on some metrics, unable to transform a structurally disadvantaged province in two years.

The Challenge of Governing in a War Zone

KP's particular challenge was that governance reform was being attempted simultaneously with active Taliban attacks on government officials, schools, and public spaces. Teachers were targeted; school buildings were bombed; police officers were killed. The investment in education and governance reform required courage from implementers who were literally risking their lives to teach or inspect schools.

The Taliban's specific targeting of girls' schools and vaccination workers in KP — combined with the PTI government's initial ambivalence about supporting military operations against the Taliban — created a contradiction in PTI's governance: it could not reform and develop KP while also accommodating the forces systematically destroying the institutions it was trying to build.

Media, Culture, and Identity in Pakistan 2005-2015

How a Decade of Private Television Reshaped the Nation

The Private TV Revolution: Impact and Consequences

The proliferation of private television channels from 2002 onward reached its full impact through this decade. By 2015, Pakistan had over 90 television channels including 30+ news channels running 24-hour programming. The competition for eyeballs produced a distinctive Pakistani media culture: aggressive talk shows, celebrity anchors, constant breaking news, and a tendency toward sensationalism that critics called 'media terrorism.'

The talk show format — a host grilling politicians, generals, and experts in front of a live audience — became the dominant form of political discourse. Anchors like Hamid Mir, Kamran Khan, Talat Hussain, and Kashif Abbasi became nationally famous figures whose opinions moved markets and shaped political narratives. The commercial logic of ratings drove channels toward dramatic, confrontational content that was entertaining but not always informative.

Despite these problems, the private media was a genuine democratisation of information. The BBC World Service and Radio Pakistan no longer dominated news; citizens in Quetta, Peshawar, and Faisalabad could watch live coverage of parliamentary proceedings, court judgments, and political protests. The lawyers' movement and the 2013 election campaign were covered with an immediacy and depth that would have been impossible without private television.

Literature and the Arts: Flourishing Under Pressure

Pakistani literature in Urdu and English flourished in this decade, producing work of international quality. Mohammed Hanif's 'A Case of Exploding Mangoes' (2008) — a darkly comic novel about Zia ul-Haq's death — won international awards and brought Pakistani English fiction to a global audience. Mohsin Hamid's 'The Reluctant Fundamentalist' (2007) and 'How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia' (2013) similarly reached international readers.

Pakistani cinema experienced a revival after decades of decline. Films like 'Bol' (2011), 'Waar' (2013), and 'Kucchi' (2015) demonstrated that Pakistani filmmakers could produce commercially and critically successful work. The entertainment industry in Lahore began to recover its confidence after years of competition from Bollywood and the demoralisation of Taliban threats against the arts.

Pakistani drama continued its tradition of social commentary. Serials addressing honour killing, domestic violence, extremism, and class inequality — broadcast on private channels to mass audiences — provided a form of public education that formal institutions could not match. Dramas like 'Humsafar', 'Zindagi Gulzar Hai', and 'Mann Mayal' became cultural phenomena, watched across Pakistan and in the diaspora.

Religious Extremism and Counter-Narratives

The decade saw both the intensification of extremist religious ideology — spread through madrassas, mosque networks, and increasingly online — and the development of more organised counter-narratives. Sufi traditions, always resilient in Pakistani popular culture, were increasingly articulated as alternatives to Taliban-style puritanism.

The murder of Shahbaz Bhatti — Pakistan's Federal Minister for Minorities and only Christian cabinet member — in March 2011, and the assassination of Punjab Governor Salmaan Taseer in January 2011 by his own bodyguard after he publicly defended a Christian woman accused of blasphemy, demonstrated the murderous reach of religious extremism. Taseer's killer was celebrated by segments of the public and the religious establishment — a deeply disturbing indication of how far religious extremism had penetrated Pakistani social attitudes.

Against this backdrop, civil society organisations, progressive media, and individual intellectuals maintained a counter-narrative that defended religious tolerance, minority rights, and the original pluralist vision of Jinnah's founding address. This was not an easy position to hold publicly in Pakistan of the 2010s.

Pakistan in 2015: Stocktaking After a Decade of Crisis

Where the Nation Stood After the APS Massacre and CPEC's Launch

The Security Situation: Turning the Corner

By the end of 2015, Pakistan's security situation had improved materially from the dark years of 2012-2013, when terrorist attacks were occurring daily and major cities felt under siege. Zarb-e-Azb had disrupted TTP command structures in North Waziristan. The Karachi operation had reduced the city's murder rate dramatically. The National Action Plan, while incompletely implemented, had focused state action on the terrorist infrastructure.

The improvement was real but fragile. The TTP had dispersed rather than been destroyed; many fighters had crossed into Afghanistan where they reorganised. The Afghan Taliban retained their Pakistani sanctuary. Sectarian organisations — SSP/ASWJ — continued to operate. And the madrassas that had produced the extremists of this decade were still producing students on the same curriculum.

Democratic Consolidation: Fragile but Real

Pakistan's democracy in 2015 was functioning — imperfectly, with military pressure in the background, with judicial activism that sometimes overstepped, with a media that was both free and irresponsible. But it was functioning: elections were held, governments were formed, parliament debated, courts adjudicated, and media reported.

The 2013 transition had demonstrated that competitive elections and peaceful transfers of power were possible in Pakistan. A generation of politicians who had been imprisoned, exiled, and persecuted were back in the arena. New political forces — PTI, the MQM's challengers in Karachi — were competing. The political landscape was more competitive and pluralistic than at any previous point in Pakistani history.

The central challenge that remained unresolved was civil-military relations. The army's institutional role in politics — through the ISI's domestic operations, the military courts, the security establishment's veto on foreign policy — had not been constitutionally resolved. Pakistan's democracy was real but remained conditional on military acceptance. The next decade's story would be shaped by whether civilian and military institutions could find a sustainable equilibrium.

Education and Human Development 2005-2015: The Unfinished Agenda

A Growing Population, an Underfunded System, and the Madrassa Alternative

The Public Education System: Ghost Schools and Real Children

Pakistan's public education system in this decade was characterised by a fundamental gap between the number of children who should be in school and those who actually were. UNESCO estimated that Pakistan had the world's second-largest out-of-school population — over 5 million primary-age children not enrolled — behind only Nigeria.

The causes were structural and political. Ghost schools — institutions that existed on government rolls and collected salaries but had no functioning teachers or students — remained widespread in Sindh and Balochistan despite multiple reform programmes. Teacher absenteeism rates in government schools were estimated at 20-30% in many areas. Physical infrastructure was poor: schools without functioning toilets, classrooms that flooded in monsoon, and buildings destroyed in the 2010 floods that were not rebuilt for years.

The Right to Education Act of 2012 — requiring free and compulsory education for children aged 5-16 — was a legislative achievement that remained largely aspirational. Pakistan did not have the fiscal resources, trained teachers, or administrative capacity to implement universal primary education without a transformation of priorities that no government was willing to undertake.

The Madrassa Sector: Reform Attempts and Resistance

The National Action Plan of December 2014 included specific commitments to register and reform Pakistan's madrassa sector — estimated at over 20,000 institutions by 2015 — and to end the teaching of hate speech and extremist ideology. Implementation was resisted at every step by the religious establishment, which regarded any government regulation of religious education as an attack on Islam.

Some madrassas were genuine educational institutions providing free food and accommodation to poor students who would otherwise receive no education. These institutions provided a social service that the state could not. Others were primarily ideological training grounds for militant networks, providing religious justification for violence.

The challenge was distinguishing between the two — and finding a political formula that could regulate the latter without appearing to attack the former. No Pakistani government found that formula. The madrassa sector remained largely self-regulated, its curriculum unchanged, its financing from Gulf sources unrestricted.

Higher Education: Expansion Continues

Pakistan's university sector continued its rapid expansion, with the Higher Education Commission (HEC) overseeing the establishment of new universities across the country. By 2015, Pakistan had over 180 universities — up from a handful at independence — graduating hundreds of thousands of students annually.

The quality of higher education was uneven. A few elite institutions — LUMS, IBA, NUST, and the older universities in Lahore and Karachi — produced graduates of international calibre. The majority of Pakistan's newer universities, particularly those established under political pressure in

small cities, offered degrees of limited academic value. Graduate unemployment was high; graduates from many institutions found their degrees did not qualify them for the jobs the economy offered.

The diaspora scholarship programme — Pakistanis sent abroad for PhDs on government scholarships — continued to produce trained researchers. The challenge was retaining them in Pakistan, where academic salaries were low and research infrastructure was poor. Brain drain from the university sector remained significant.

Pakistan's Relationship with the Muslim World 2005-2015

Islamic Solidarity, Saudi Arabia, and the Sectarian Proxy War

Saudi Arabia: The Double-Edged Patron

Saudi Arabia's relationship with Pakistan remained central to both countries' strategic calculations through this decade. Pakistan continued to provide military personnel to Saudi Arabia — a relationship that gave Saudi Arabia trained military capacity and Pakistan Saudi financial support. When Saudi Arabia requested Pakistani troops for its Yemen campaign in 2015, Pakistan's parliament — in an unprecedented assertion of civilian control over military deployment — voted against participation.

The Saudi funding of Deobandi and Wahhabi religious institutions in Pakistan continued, transforming Pakistani Islam in ways that contributed to the extremism Pakistan was simultaneously fighting. The contradiction was stark: Saudi Arabia was both a financial lifeline and a source of the ideology that was killing Pakistanis. The Pakistani government was unable or unwilling to address this contradiction directly.

Iran and the Sectarian Dimension

Pakistan's relationship with Iran was complicated by sectarian tensions and strategic competition. Iran supported Pakistan's Shia community and maintained relationships with Shia political organisations. Saudi Arabia funded Sunni organisations that attacked Shia targets. Pakistan was a battleground in the Saudi-Iranian proxy conflict that was reshaping the broader Middle East.

Diplomatic relations between Pakistan and Iran were maintained but were complicated by border security issues — Iranian Revolutionary Guards periodically conducted operations inside Pakistani territory in pursuit of Baloch insurgents who used both countries' territory. The Iran-Pakistan gas pipeline project, which would have addressed Pakistan's energy shortage, was blocked by American sanctions pressure despite being built to the Pakistani border.

The Pashtun Question: Identity, Displacement, and the Afghan War's Legacy

A People Caught Between Two States and Two Wars

The Pashtun Experience on Both Sides of the Durand Line

Pakistan's Pashtun population — concentrated in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and FATA — experienced this decade as a period of extraordinary suffering. Military operations, Taliban violence, drone strikes, and mass displacement combined to make FATA and adjacent KP districts among the most dangerous places on earth.

The IDPs (Internally Displaced Persons) from successive military operations — Swat, Bajaur, South Waziristan, and eventually North Waziristan — numbered in the millions at various points. The Swat displacement of 2009 (2.7 million), the North Waziristan displacement of 2014 (nearly 1 million), and smaller operations added up to a total displacement that dwarfed any previous internal migration in Pakistani history.

The Pashtun Tahafuz Movement (PTM) — a civil rights movement founded in 2018 (slightly beyond this volume) but rooted in the grievances of this decade — would eventually articulate the Pashtun experience of military operations, enforced disappearances, and displacement in ways that forced a national conversation. The seeds were planted in the suffering documented through this decade.

Afghan-Pakistani Relations: The Impossible Partnership

Pakistan and Afghanistan's relationship through this decade was one of deep mutual dependency and profound mutual mistrust. Pakistan hosted millions of Afghan refugees, provided transit for international supplies to NATO forces, and claimed to be fighting the Taliban. Afghanistan accused Pakistan of providing sanctuary to the Quetta Shura and Haqqani Network while pretending to be an ally.

The Afghan government under Hamid Karzai was increasingly hostile to Pakistan, blaming Pakistani intelligence for Taliban attacks and seeking to build relationships with India specifically to counterbalance Pakistani influence. India's construction of roads, power plants, and the Afghan parliament building was welcomed by Afghanistan and viewed with extreme suspicion by Pakistan.

The fundamental question that no Pakistani government answered honestly was: what kind of Afghanistan did Pakistan actually want? A weak, fragmented Afghanistan that could be managed? A Taliban-governed Afghanistan that would be strategically aligned? Or a stable, prosperous Afghanistan that would be a trading partner and neighbour? The strategic ambiguity that produced the double game made a coherent answer impossible.

Pakistan's Judiciary 2008-2015: Activism, Overreach, and Accountability

The Courts as the Third Power — for Good and Ill

Judicial Activism Under Chief Justice Chaudhry

The restored Supreme Court under Chief Justice Iftikhar Chaudhry became one of the most powerful institutional actors in Pakistani politics from 2009 to 2013. The court's suo motu jurisdiction was exercised with unprecedented frequency — the Chief Justice would read newspaper reports of injustice or governance failure and summon officials to explain themselves without formal petitions being filed.

The court's record was genuinely mixed. Its interventions on enforced disappearances forced the security establishment to account for missing persons in ways it had never previously been required to. Its environmental judgments protected public spaces and forests. Its orders on the sugar price manipulation addressed genuine market manipulation.

But the court also overreached. The dismissal of Prime Minister Gilani for contempt raised fundamental questions about whether the courts could remove elected governments through the back door. The court's involvement in executive decisions on appointments, prices, and policy substituted judicial for political judgment. Critics argued the Chief Justice had personalised the court's power in ways that were themselves anti-democratic.

The NRO Judgment and Its Political Consequences

The Supreme Court's December 2009 judgment striking down the National Reconciliation Ordinance — which had dropped corruption cases against Benazir Bhutto, Asif Zardari, and approximately 8,000 others — was one of the most consequential judicial decisions in Pakistani history. The judgment restored corruption cases against President Zardari, creating a constitutional standoff: could a sitting president be prosecuted?

The court's subsequent demand that the Prime Minister write to Swiss authorities to reopen corruption cases against Zardari — a demand that Prime Minister Gilani refused on the grounds of presidential immunity — led directly to Gilani's dismissal for contempt. The episode illustrated the dangers of judicial activism: a legitimate anti-corruption judgment had created a constitutional crisis that arguably did more harm to democratic institutions than the corruption it was addressing.

The Economy: Remittances, Labour Migration, and Structural Reform

Pakistan's Overseas Workers as the Real Economic Pillar

Remittances: The Hidden Economy

Workers' remittances from the Pakistani diaspora — the Gulf, UK, USA, Canada, and Europe — became Pakistan's largest source of foreign exchange in this decade, exceeding merchandise exports in some years. Remittances grew from approximately $5 billion in 2005 to over $18 billion by 2015, financing imports, supporting the rupee, and sustaining millions of households across Punjab, KP, Azad Kashmir, and Balochistan.

The remittance economy had important consequences. It reduced poverty in remittance-receiving households; funded house construction that transformed village appearances across Punjab; financed children's education and health care; and provided a buffer against economic shocks. It also created dependency: communities that had relied on male migration for income had little alternative if Gulf economies contracted or oil prices fell.

The State Bank of Pakistan's drive to channel remittances through formal banking channels — rather than hawala networks — was partially successful. Formal remittance flows grew steadily; the banking sector benefited from the foreign exchange inflows; and mobile banking was beginning to provide services to previously unbanked migrants' families.

Taxation: The Persistent Failure

Pakistan's tax-to-GDP ratio remained stubbornly among the lowest in the world — hovering between 9-12% through this decade despite repeated IMF pressure and government reform programmes. The structural reasons were well understood: agriculture was largely exempt from direct taxation; the real estate sector used undervaluation to minimise stamp duty; large informal sectors were outside the tax net; and wealthy individuals with political connections evaded taxation with impunity.

Every government announced tax reform; no government implemented it comprehensively. The Federal Board of Revenue (FBR) remained an institution famous for corruption and inefficiency. The 'withholding tax' system — which collected taxes at source from transactions rather than through self-assessment — produced revenue but discouraged economic activity and was subject to extensive abuse.

The consequence of inadequate tax revenue was that every government relied on borrowing to finance even basic services, creating debt dynamics that made fiscal stability perpetually elusive.

The Salmaan Taseer and Shahbaz Bhatti Assassinations: 2011

The murders of Punjab Governor Salmaan Taseer on 4 January 2011 and Federal Minorities Minister Shahbaz Bhatti on 2 March 2011 were among the most disturbing events of this decade — not merely for the acts themselves but for the public reaction they provoked.

Taseer had publicly supported Aasia Bibi, a Christian farmworker sentenced to death for blasphemy, and had called the blasphemy law 'a black law' that needed to be repealed. His bodyguard Mumtaz Qadri shot him 27 times, claiming religious justification. Qadri was arrested but was showered with rose petals by lawyers at the Rawalpindi court. Thousands attended a vigil supporting him. Some religious scholars refused to condemn the killing.

Shahbaz Bhatti, the only Christian in the federal cabinet, was killed two months later by gunmen who left Tehrik-e-Taliban Punjab leaflets. He had known he was a target — he had made a video testament before his death — but had refused to abandon his advocacy for Pakistan's minorities. His murder completed the political elimination of the few voices willing to publicly defend blasphemy law reform.

The public celebration of Qadri and the intimidation of those who mourned Taseer revealed how deeply extremist religious attitudes had penetrated Pakistani society — not just in the madrassas and tribal areas, but in educated, professional, urban communities.

The 18th Amendment: Federalism Restored

In April 2010, the National Assembly unanimously passed the Eighteenth Amendment to the constitution — one of the most significant constitutional developments since the 1973 Constitution itself. The amendment removed the Eighth Amendment's Article 58(2)(b) — the presidential power to dismiss governments — restoring a purely parliamentary system. It also transferred significant powers from the federal government to the provinces, devolving health, education, and several other subjects entirely to provincial jurisdiction.

The 18th Amendment was a rare instance of Pakistani political consensus: PPP, PML-N, ANP, MQM, and religious parties all supported it. The removal of Article 58(2)(b) completed the work that the 13th Amendment had begun in 1997 before Musharraf reimposed the provision through the LFO. The devolution of powers to provinces addressed a long-standing demand of the smaller provinces — KP, Sindh, and Balochistan — that had felt dominated by a Punjab-centred federal government.

The amendment's provincial autonomy provisions created new challenges: provinces now had responsibilities but needed the administrative capacity, human resources, and financial management to exercise them. Health and education devolution particularly required provincial bureaucracies that were in many cases not prepared for the expanded role. But the constitutional direction — toward genuine federalism — was correct and important.

Conclusion: 2005–2015 — Terrorism, Democratic Resilience, and Transformation

The decade from 2005 to 2015 was defined by two great contests: between democracy and military power, and between the Pakistani state and the jihadist forces it had created. The outcomes of both contests were partial and unresolved, but the direction of change was in some respects more hopeful than Pakistan's previous decades had suggested.

The democratic contest produced genuine achievements. The lawyers' movement forced the restoration of a deposed Chief Justice through nonviolent civil society action — an unprecedented victory. The PPP government completed its full five-year term despite constant crises — Pakistan's first civilian government to do so. The 2013 elections produced the first civilian-to-civilian transfer of power in Pakistani history. These were real milestones, however imperfect the governments involved.

The security contest produced mixed results. Pakistan eventually turned its military with serious intent against the domestic Taliban — Operation Zarb-e-Azb was a genuine military commitment, not another half-measure. The decline in terrorist attacks from 2015 onward was real. But the strategic distinction between 'good' and 'bad' Taliban — fighting the TTP while protecting the Afghan Taliban and the Haqqani Network — meant that Pakistan's counter-terrorism remained incomplete and its Afghan policy remained a source of regional instability.

The decade's great tragedy was the APS massacre — 132 children killed for their fathers' profession. It was the worst possible outcome of three decades of jihadist investment: the monsters created to fight others had turned on Pakistan's own children. The National Action Plan that followed was the most serious counter-terrorism commitment in Pakistan's history. Its implementation remained the central challenge of Pakistani governance as the decade closed.

Appendix: Key Events Timeline 2005–2015

Date	Event
8 Oct 2005	Kashmir earthquake — magnitude 7.6; ~73,000 killed; 3.5m displaced
7 Jul 2005	London bombings — 52 killed; three bombers of Pakistani origin
26 Aug 2006	Nawab Akbar Bugti killed by military in Balochistan; insurgency intensifies
Nov 2006	Women's Protection Bill — Zina Ordinance reformed; MMA protests
9 Mar 2007	CJ Iftikhar Chaudhry deposed by Musharraf; lawyers' movement begins
10 Jul 2007	Operation Silence — Lal Masjid stormed; ~100 killed
Jul 2007	TTP declares war on Pakistani state after Lal Masjid
18 Oct 2007	Benazir Bhutto returns to Karachi; Karachi bombing kills 139
3 Nov 2007	Musharraf declares Emergency — constitution suspended; TV channels shut
Dec 2007	TTP formally constituted under Baitullah Mehsud
27 Dec 2007	Benazir Bhutto assassinated in Rawalpindi
Feb 2008	Elections — PPP wins 97 seats; PML-Q decimated
Mar 2008	Yousuf Raza Gilani becomes Prime Minister
18 Aug 2008	Musharraf resigns as President; goes into exile
Sep 2008	Asif Ali Zardari elected President
26 Nov 2008	Mumbai attacks — 166 killed; Pakistani LeT members responsible
Mar 2009	CJ Chaudhry restored following lawyers' Long March
May 2009	Operation Rah-e-Rast — Swat cleared; 2.7m civilians displaced
5 Aug 2009	CIA drone kills Baitullah Mehsud, TTP founder
Jul–Sep 2010	Great Floods — one-fifth of Pakistan inundated; 21m displaced
Nov 2010	WikiLeaks cables — ISI double-dealing documented
27 Jan 2011	Raymond Davis affair — CIA contractor kills two in Lahore
2 May 2011	US Navy SEALs kill Osama bin Laden in Abbottabad
26 Nov 2011	Salala attack — 24 Pakistani soldiers killed by US aircraft
Jun 2012	PM Gilani dismissed by Supreme Court for contempt
Oct 2011	PTI's massive Lahore rally — party emerges as political force
9 Oct 2012	Malala Yousafzai shot by Taliban in Swat
11 May 2013	Historic elections — PML-N wins 166 seats; first civilian-civilian transfer
Jun 2013	Nawaz Sharif sworn in as PM for third time
Sep 2013	Peshawar church bombing kills 127 Christians — worst attack on minorities
Jun 2014	Airport attack triggers Operation Zarb-e-Azb in North Waziristan
Aug–Dec 2014	PTI dharna (sit-in) in Islamabad — 126 days

Date	Event
16 Dec 2014	APS Peshawar massacre — 132 children and 9 staff killed
25 Dec 2014	National Action Plan adopted — 20-point counter-terrorism agenda
Jan 2015	21st Amendment — military courts established for terrorist trials
Apr 2015	CPEC formally launched; Xi Jinping visits Islamabad; $46bn announced
2015	Karachi operation intensified; MQM strongholds targeted
2015	Terrorism deaths in Pakistan declining from 2013-14 peak

Appendix: Heads of State & Government 2005–2015

Name	Role	Period
Gen. Pervez Musharraf	President	Oct 1999 – Aug 2008
Muhammad Mian Soomro	Acting President	Aug–Sep 2008
Asif Ali Zardari	President	Sep 2008 – Sep 2013
Mamnoon Hussain	President	Sep 2013 – Sep 2018
Shaukat Aziz	Prime Minister	Aug 2004 – Nov 2007
Muhammad Mian Soomro	Caretaker Prime Minister	Nov 2007 – Mar 2008
Yousuf Raza Gilani	Prime Minister	Mar 2008 – Jun 2012
Raja Pervez Ashraf	Prime Minister	Jun 2012 – Mar 2013
Mir Hazar Khan Khoso	Caretaker Prime Minister	Mar–Jun 2013
Nawaz Sharif	Prime Minister (3rd term)	Jun 2013 – Jul 2017

■ Pakistan Zindabad ■

Long Live Pakistan

HISTORY OF PAKISTAN

A Comprehensive Year-by-Year Account

2015 – 2025

From Nawaz's Disqualification and Imran Khan's Rise to Economic Crisis, Political Chaos, and the Return of Old Faces

Covering: Politics • Governance • Economy • Military • Society • Foreign Relations

Volume VII of the Pakistan History Series. Continues from the 1947–2015 volume. Page numbering preserved across all volumes.

Foreword: A Decade of Democratic Disruption and Unending Crisis

The decade from 2015 to 2025 is the most chaotic, contradictory, and consequential in Pakistan's recent history — and in some ways, the most representative of every structural dysfunction the country has accumulated over seven decades. It is the decade in which the pattern became undeniable: Pakistan's institutions — the judiciary, the military, the political parties, the economy — were caught in a cycle of mutual destruction that no single actor could break and every actor contributed to.

The decade opened with Nawaz Sharif's PML-N government pursuing CPEC and the promise of Chinese infrastructure investment. It closed — in 2025 — with Pakistan under yet another military-backed government, Nawaz Sharif returned from exile for the third time, and the country facing its worst economic crisis since 1971.

In between: the Panama Papers scandal that toppled Nawaz Sharif in 2017; Imran Khan's PTI winning the 2018 election in circumstances that critics called a 'selected' rather than elected government; the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020 that tested every institution; PTI's removal through a no-confidence vote in 2022 followed by Imran Khan's arrest, trial, and imprisonment; the catastrophic floods of 2022; the IMF bailouts that became a permanent feature; and a political polarisation so deep that reasonable discourse across party lines became almost impossible.

This volume covers those ten turbulent years with the same depth and detail as its predecessors — recording the choices made, the opportunities missed, the personalities who shaped events, and the structural forces that made outcomes that appeared avoidable feel, in retrospect, almost inevitable.

2016 Panama Papers; Dawn Leaks; The Army's Veto on Foreign Policy

Nawaz Sharif's Government Under Mounting Pressure

The Panama Papers: April 2016

In April 2016, the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists released the 'Panama Papers' — 11.5 million leaked documents from the Mossack Fonseca law firm in Panama that exposed the offshore financial dealings of politicians, businesspeople, and celebrities worldwide. Among those named: Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's children — Hassan, Hussain, and Maryam — who held offshore companies and luxury London properties whose financing could not be explained by their declared Pakistani income.

The Panama Papers became the central political crisis of 2016. Opposition parties — led by Imran Khan's PTI — demanded Nawaz's immediate resignation, holding rallies across the country. Nawaz denied wrongdoing and challenged his opponents to prove their allegations. The Supreme Court, exercising its suo motu jurisdiction, took up the matter and established a Joint Investigation Team (JIT) to examine the Sharif family's finances.

The Panama Papers case would ultimately result in Nawaz Sharif's disqualification from public office in July 2017 — a judicial verdict that transformed Pakistani politics. But through 2016, the case was building slowly, with the Supreme Court and JIT investigating while the political conflict between the government and opposition consumed the country's attention.

The Dawn Leaks Controversy

In October 2016, the Dawn newspaper published a story by journalist Cyril Almeida reporting that Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif had, in a high-level meeting, warned military and intelligence officials that Pakistan's tolerance of militant groups was damaging the country's international standing and creating the risk of international isolation. The story quoted civilian government officials challenging the military's protection of groups like Jaish-e-Mohammad and Lashkar-e-Taiba.

The military's response was furious. ISPR called the story 'fabricated', demanded a retraction, and placed Almeida's name on an Exit Control List preventing him from leaving Pakistan. The federal government — evidently under pressure — announced an inquiry into how the leak had occurred, implying that the newspaper's publication of an accurate account of a government meeting constituted a security breach.

The Dawn Leaks episode illustrated with crystal clarity the central tension in Pakistani governance: a civilian Prime Minister apparently challenging the military's management of militant groups, and a military establishment that regarded this as an intolerable interference in its domain. The story's essential accuracy — that these tensions existed at the highest levels — was never seriously contested.

CPEC Progress and Its Controversies

Through 2016, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor was advancing rapidly on its energy component. Several Chinese-financed power plants were under construction or approaching completion. The Lahore Orange Line Metro — funded by Chinese loans — was under construction. Road projects connecting Gwadar to the national highway network were progressing.

CPEC controversies were accumulating in parallel. Opposition politicians complained that the terms of CPEC agreements were not being made public — a lack of transparency that fuelled speculation about unfavourable terms. Baloch nationalists continued to oppose Gwadar development and attacked Chinese workers. India protested that CPEC passed through Pakistani-administered Kashmir — territory India claimed — and declined to participate in Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative forums.

The economic arithmetic of CPEC was beginning to raise concerns. The guaranteed returns promised to Chinese power producers, denominated in dollars, would create massive future payment obligations. Pakistan would need to buy back the electricity at contracted prices whether or not it needed the capacity. Critics warned that CPEC's energy component was replacing the circular debt problem with a capacity payment problem.

India-Pakistan: Surgical Strikes and Escalation

In September 2016, Indian Army commandos conducted what India called 'surgical strikes' across the Line of Control in Pakistani-administered Kashmir, targeting alleged militant launch pads. India announced the strikes publicly; Pakistan denied that any significant cross-LoC operation had occurred, calling the Indian claims exaggerated.

The surgical strikes were triggered by a militant attack on an Indian Army base at Uri in which 19 soldiers were killed — one of the deadliest attacks on Indian forces in Kashmir for years. The Jaish-e-Mohammad was blamed. The attack and India's response reflected the deteriorating state of India-Pakistan relations under Prime Minister Modi, whose BJP government had taken a more assertive posture on cross-border terrorism than its predecessors.

2017 Nawaz Disqualified; Shahid Khaqan Abbasi PM; Faizabad Sit-in

The Supreme Court Removes an Elected Prime Minister Again

28 July 2017: The Panama Judgment — Nawaz Disqualified

On 28 July 2017, the Supreme Court of Pakistan delivered its judgment in the Panama Papers case, disqualifying Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif from holding public office. The disqualification was on the grounds that Nawaz had not declared a salary from a Dubai company — Capital FZE — in his nomination papers, making him 'not honest' within the meaning of Article 62(1)(f) of the constitution.

The judgment was controversial from the moment it was delivered. The legal grounds — disqualification for non-disclosure of a receivable salary from a company whose ownership was disputed — were seen by many legal scholars as disproportionate. The court had found no direct evidence linking Nawaz to the offshore properties themselves. His supporters argued the verdict was judicially manufactured to remove a leader who had challenged military prerogatives.

Nawaz Sharif's response was defiant. He declared himself the victim of a conspiracy and began his 'Mujhe Kyun Nikala' (Why Was I Removed?) campaign, directly blaming unnamed institutions — widely understood to mean the military and judiciary — for his removal. His political comeback narrative was set from this moment.

> *"I was removed because I dared to challenge those who operate from outside the constitutional framework. The people will decide."*
>
> *— Nawaz Sharif, addressing supporters after his disqualification, July 2017*

Shahid Khaqan Abbasi: Caretaker of the PML-N Government

Shahid Khaqan Abbasi, a senior PML-N politician and former petroleum minister, was elected Prime Minister by the National Assembly in August 2017 following Nawaz's disqualification. Abbasi served as a loyalist caretaker — implementing Nawaz's agenda rather than his own — for the remainder of the parliamentary term until the 2018 elections.

The economy under Abbasi's tenure showed mixed results. GDP growth reached approximately 5.8% in 2017-18, aided by CPEC energy projects coming online. But the current account deficit was widening alarmingly as CPEC imports (machinery, construction materials, Chinese labour) boosted the import bill without generating equivalent export earnings. Foreign exchange reserves were declining. A balance of payments crisis was approaching.

The Faizabad Sit-in: November 2017

In November 2017, supporters of a religious party, Tehreek-e-Labaik Pakistan (TLP) — a new extremist political organisation that had formed around the Barelvi defence of the blasphemy laws — blocked Islamabad's main artery at Faizabad interchange for three weeks, paralysing the capital and bringing government to a standstill.

The sit-in was triggered by a government minister's alleged modification of the oath taken by politicians affirming the finality of the prophethood of Muhammad — a change that the TLP characterised as blasphemous. The government capitulated completely, signing an agreement

drafted by the protesters, dismissing the responsible minister, and paying the protesters' expenses.

The Faizabad episode exposed a fundamental failure of governance: the state's inability to enforce the law against a mob of religious extremists in the capital city. Army soldiers had watched the sit-in rather than clearing it; the government had negotiated rather than prosecuting. The TLP's success in extracting concessions through street violence would encourage further sit-ins in subsequent years.

2018 PTI Wins; Imran Khan Becomes Prime Minister; Economic Crisis Looms

The 'Selected' Prime Minister and the Challenge of Governing

The July 2018 Elections: PTI Wins, Questions Follow

The general election of 25 July 2018 produced a result that brought Imran Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf to power with 116 National Assembly seats — the largest single-party haul but still short of a majority, requiring coalition partners. The PPP won 43 seats; the PML-N won 64 — dramatically reduced from its 2013 performance but still a significant second-place showing.

The elections were contested in an atmosphere of intense media restriction, opposition complaints about pre-poll manipulation, and what critics called the 'selection' of PTI by military establishment that had orchestrated Nawaz's disqualification, created pressure on PML-N candidates to defect, and ensured media coverage favoured PTI. Imran Khan himself denied any establishment backing, but the pattern of events — judicial disqualification of the main opposition leader, RTS failure on election night, media blackout on PML-N — was too consistent to be coincidental in the assessment of many analysts.

Imran Khan was sworn in as Prime Minister on 18 August 2018. His inauguration speech promised a 'Naya Pakistan' (New Pakistan) — a state built on justice, merit, and accountability. He invoked Medina's governance model as an inspiration. The expectations were enormous; the inherited problems were equally enormous.

Imran Khan's Economic Inheritance

The economic situation PTI inherited in August 2018 was severe. The current account deficit had reached $18 billion — nearly 6% of GDP. Foreign exchange reserves had fallen to below two months of import cover. The rupee was significantly overvalued and vulnerable to a sharp depreciation. The fiscal deficit was running at approximately 7% of GDP. Debt levels were high and growing.

PTI's initial response was confused — Finance Minister Asad Umar initially sought to avoid an IMF programme, negotiating emergency support from Saudi Arabia ($3 billion), UAE ($3 billion), and China (currency swaps) to shore up reserves. This 'friendly country' approach delayed but did not avoid the eventual IMF programme, which was signed in July 2019.

The rupee depreciated sharply — losing approximately 30% of its value against the dollar in 2018-19. Inflation rose. Interest rates were increased sharply to defend the currency and meet IMF conditionality. Economic growth slowed dramatically — GDP growth fell to 1.9% in 2018-19 and turned negative in 2019-20. The economic pain was real and was felt most acutely by the middle and lower-income groups that had formed PTI's electoral base.

Accountability: NAB Under PTI

The National Accountability Bureau, under PTI's direction, pursued aggressive cases against PML-N and PPP leaders. Nawaz Sharif, who had returned to Pakistan, was arrested and imprisoned on corruption charges in October 2018 — subsequently sentenced to seven years in the Avenfield properties case. His daughter Maryam Nawaz was also convicted and imprisoned. Asif Ali Zardari was arrested on corruption charges.

PTI's use of NAB was characterised by the opposition as selective accountability — the targeting of political opponents while PTI members and individuals associated with the establishment faced fewer prosecutions. The accountability drive, while popular with PTI's base, did little to reduce actual corruption in governance and succeeded primarily in keeping opposition leaders entangled in legal proceedings rather than political activity.

2019 IMF Programme; Pulwama Crisis; Article 370 Abrogated in Kashmir

Pakistan's Economy Under Treatment; India-Pakistan at the Brink Again

The IMF Programme: Pakistan's Thirteenth

In July 2019, Pakistan signed its thirteenth IMF programme — a $6 billion Extended Fund Facility — signalling the continuation of the cycle of fiscal crisis and external bailout that had defined Pakistani economic history for decades. The programme required significant currency depreciation (completed), higher interest rates (implemented), fiscal consolidation (promised), and structural reforms including energy sector rationalisation.

The IMF programme's conditionality was painful but necessary. Energy tariffs were raised, reducing circular debt but burdening consumers. Tax collection improved modestly. The fiscal deficit was brought down. But the structural problem — Pakistan's inability to generate sufficient tax revenue from its own economy without external pressure — remained unresolved.

The Pulwama Attack and Balakot Strikes: February 2019

On 14 February 2019, a suicide car bombing in Pulwama, Indian-administered Kashmir, killed 40 Indian paramilitary soldiers in the deadliest attack on Indian security forces in decades. The attacker was a local Kashmiri; Jaish-e-Mohammad claimed responsibility.

India's response on 26 February was airstrikes on what it said was a Jaish training camp at Balakot inside Pakistan's Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province — the first Indian airstrike on Pakistani soil since 1971. Pakistan's air force scrambled, and the following day Pakistani aircraft crossed into Indian airspace, resulting in a dogfight in which an Indian pilot, Wing Commander Abhinandan Varthaman, was shot down and captured.

The Balakot crisis was the most dangerous India-Pakistan confrontation since Kargil — two nuclear-armed states exchanging airstrikes across an international border. Pakistan released the captured pilot within days, defusing the immediate crisis. But the episode demonstrated that the risk of miscalculation leading to nuclear-armed conflict remained disturbingly real.

India Revokes Article 370: August 2019

On 5 August 2019, the Indian government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi revoked Article 370 of the Indian constitution, which had given Jammu and Kashmir its special autonomous status, and divided the state into two Union Territories under direct central government control. Kashmir was simultaneously placed under a communication blackout — phones, internet, and cable TV cut for months.

Pakistan reacted with outrage. Nawaz Sharif called it illegal and vowed to take the matter to international forums. Pakistan downgraded diplomatic relations with India, suspended trade, and expelled the Indian ambassador. Prime Minister Imran Khan addressed the UN General Assembly in a passionate speech warning of possible war and even nuclear conflict over Kashmir.

Pakistan's international response, while vocal, produced limited practical results. China expressed support but the Muslim world was largely silent. Western countries urged restraint. India maintained that Article 370's revocation was a purely internal matter. Kashmir's special status — the issue at the heart of the partition's original dispute — had been unilaterally ended by India, and Pakistan

could do nothing about it.

2020 COVID-19; Smart Lockdown; Pakistan's Unusual Pandemic Response

Managing a Global Crisis with Limited State Capacity

COVID-19 Reaches Pakistan: February 2020

Pakistan's first confirmed COVID-19 cases were detected in late February 2020 — pilgrims returning from Iran where the virus was spreading rapidly. The pandemic reached Pakistan at a moment of particular economic vulnerability: GDP growth was already negative, an IMF programme was underway with demanding conditionality, and the healthcare system was chronically underfunded.

Prime Minister Imran Khan resisted a full lockdown, arguing that Pakistan's economy — and particularly its millions of daily-wage labourers — could not sustain the economic impact of complete closure. His government instead implemented a 'smart lockdown' strategy: targeted closures of specific areas and sectors, rather than a national shutdown.

The smart lockdown approach was controversial. Public health experts warned it was insufficient to control transmission. Religious leaders successfully negotiated to keep mosques open during Ramadan — a decision that many epidemiologists believed accelerated spread. Pakistan's official COVID death toll remained lower than many comparable countries, though the reliability of testing and mortality data was questioned.

The Ehsaas Programme: Social Protection Expanded

One of the more positive developments of the PTI government was the expansion of social protection through the Ehsaas ('Empathy') programme. Building on the earlier BISP (Benazir Income Support Programme) established under the PPP, Ehsaas extended cash transfers to millions of additional vulnerable households, adding new programmes for subsidised food, student loans, and health insurance.

During COVID-19, the Ehsaas Emergency Cash programme distributed Rs 12,000 per household to approximately 12 million families — a significant emergency social protection response that reached many who had no other safety net. The digital delivery mechanism — using CNIC (national ID) verification and mobile payments — reduced leakage and improved targeting compared to previous cash transfer programmes.

Political Tensions: PDM Forms Against PTI

Through 2020, the political opposition to Imran Khan organised into the Pakistan Democratic Movement (PDM) — an alliance of eleven parties including PML-N, PPP, JUI-F, and others. The PDM held massive rallies across the country, with opposition leaders including Maryam Nawaz (released from prison on medical grounds), Bilawal Bhutto Zardari, and Maulana Fazlur Rehman delivering fiery speeches demanding Imran's resignation.

Maulana Fazlur Rehman led the JUI-F and brought the religious right's mobilisation capacity to the opposition coalition, providing an Islamist dimension to what was otherwise a coalition of secular parties. The PDM's narrative — that Imran Khan had been 'selected' by the military and was governing incompetently — resonated with the urban middle class that had originally supported PTI but was experiencing economic pain.

2021 Afghan Taliban Return to Kabul; PTI-Military Tensions Begin

Afghanistan Transformed Again; Pakistan's Celebration Proves Premature

The US Withdrawal and Taliban Takeover: August 2021

The Biden administration's final withdrawal of American forces from Afghanistan, completed in August 2021 after 20 years of war, was followed by the fastest military collapse in recent history. The Afghan National Army, trained and equipped by NATO at a cost of hundreds of billions of dollars, dissolved in days. Kabul fell to the Taliban on 15 August 2021 — the same date that Pakistan celebrated its Independence Day — without significant resistance.

Pakistan's initial reaction to the Taliban's return was one of barely concealed satisfaction in some quarters. Prime Minister Imran Khan said Afghans had 'broken the shackles of slavery.' This celebration proved premature: the Taliban's return brought not the stable, pro-Pakistan government the ISI had cultivated but instead a complex set of problems that would worsen over the following years.

The Afghan Taliban's return emboldened the Pakistani Taliban (TTP), who now had a sanctuary in Afghanistan from which to plan and launch attacks inside Pakistan. Pakistani Taliban commanders — who had been fighting from Afghan territory — were effectively sheltered by the new Taliban government in Kabul, which declined to extradite them. Pakistan's calculation that it could separate the Afghan and Pakistani Taliban was exposed as flawed.

The TTP Threat Resurges

From late 2021, terrorist attacks inside Pakistan increased sharply as the TTP, emboldened by the Taliban's victory in Afghanistan, stepped up operations. Suicide bombings, targeted killings of security personnel, and attacks on police stations became increasingly frequent — particularly in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan.

The government's response included attempting to negotiate with the TTP — talks facilitated by the Afghan Taliban — and military operations. Both approaches produced limited results. The TTP refused to accept the Pakistani state's constitutional framework; the military operations could not destroy an organisation with cross-border sanctuary.

By 2022-23, Pakistan's security situation had deteriorated significantly from the relative improvement of 2015-2019. The gains made in Operation Zarb-e-Azb were being partially reversed as the TTP rebuilt its operational capacity with Afghan sanctuary.

PTI's Governance Record and Growing Tensions with the Military

Imran Khan's government in 2021 was experiencing both achievements and failures. The economic situation had stabilised from the acute crisis of 2018-19: growth recovered to 5.7% in 2020-21, aided by global commodity price rises that boosted Pakistan's exports. Remittances reached record levels as overseas Pakistanis sent money home during COVID-19 through official channels.

But the relationship between Imran Khan and the military establishment — which had been the basis of his political rise — was fraying. Imran clashed with the ISI chief over the appointment of the new DG-ISI. He was increasingly perceived within military circles as difficult to manage and unwilling to accept guidance on foreign and security policy. The establishment that had facilitated

his election was reassessing the relationship.

2022 Imran Khan Ousted; Catastrophic Floods; Economic Meltdown

Pakistan's Most Crisis-Laden Year in Recent Memory

The No-Confidence Vote: April 2022

On 10 April 2022, Prime Minister Imran Khan lost a vote of no-confidence in the National Assembly — 174 members voting against him, more than the 172 required. He became the first Pakistani Prime Minister to be removed through a parliamentary vote of no-confidence.

Imran Khan had attempted to forestall the vote through extraordinary manoeuvres — the Speaker initially refused to allow the vote, the Deputy Speaker ruled the no-confidence motion invalid on national security grounds, and the President dissolved the National Assembly. The Supreme Court unanimously overturned all these actions and ordered the vote to proceed.

Imran Khan's response was to declare himself the victim of a 'foreign conspiracy' — specifically alleging that the United States had orchestrated his removal through a 'cipher' — a diplomatic cable from the Pakistani ambassador in Washington reporting American displeasure with Imran's foreign policy positions. The allegation was never substantiated; American officials denied it. But the 'foreign conspiracy' narrative became the foundation of Imran's political comeback and generated enormous popular sympathy.

Shahbaz Sharif: Prime Minister in Crisis

Shahbaz Sharif — younger brother of Nawaz and Chief Minister of Punjab during three of his brother's governments — was elected Prime Minister by the coalition that had voted Imran out. The coalition was a remarkable collection: PPP, PML-N, MQM, JUI-F, and fragments of other parties united by nothing except opposition to Imran Khan.

Shahbaz inherited an economy in acute distress. The rupee had depreciated sharply; inflation was approaching 25%; the IMF programme had been suspended because Imran Khan had reversed the required fuel subsidy removal to buy political support before his ouster. Restarting the IMF programme required reimposing the fuel price increases — a politically devastating decision that the coalition government was forced to make.

The Catastrophic Floods of 2022: June–October

Pakistan's 2022 monsoon was catastrophic beyond any historical precedent. By the time the floods receded in October 2022, approximately one-third of Pakistan was under water — significantly worse than the 2010 floods. Over 1,700 people were killed, 33 million displaced, and economic losses estimated at $30 billion.

The Sindh province was the worst affected — vast areas of the agricultural heartland were inundated for months, destroying entire crop cycles and displacing millions of rural families who had no resources to rebuild. Balochistan's road network was devastated. KP's northern districts suffered flash floods. The scale of the disaster demanded a response that Pakistan's fiscal situation — already stretched by economic crisis — made almost impossible to provide.

Climate Foreign Minister Sherry Rehman made Pakistan's case powerfully at international forums: Pakistan contributed less than 1% of global greenhouse gas emissions but was bearing a disproportionate share of climate change's consequences. The UN Secretary-General visited the

flooded areas and described the scene as 'climate carnage.' International pledges of aid were significant but disbursement was slow.

Imran Khan's Arrest and the Long March

Following his removal, Imran Khan launched a relentless political campaign to return to power, holding massive rallies across the country. In May 2022 he led a 'Long March' on Islamabad; in November 2022, after surviving an assassination attempt in Wazirabad where he was shot in the leg, he relaunched another long march.

The November 2022 attack — in which a gunman opened fire on the container truck carrying Imran Khan — became a major political flashpoint. Imran blamed senior government and military officials by name, a level of direct accusation against the establishment unprecedented in Pakistani political history. The government denied involvement.

2023 Imran Arrested; 9 May Violence; Economic Default Averted

Pakistan on the Edge — Politically, Economically, and Constitutionally

The Arrest of Imran Khan: 9 May 2023

On 9 May 2023, paramilitary Rangers arrested Imran Khan from the premises of the Islamabad High Court where he had appeared for hearings, in what was widely regarded as an illegal arrest given the court's premises. His arrest triggered immediate and violent protests across Pakistan's major cities — PTI supporters attacked military installations and GHQ in Rawalpindi, the Corps Commander's residence in Lahore was stormed and burned, and Radio Pakistan's Peshawar office was attacked.

The 9 May violence was the most significant attack on military symbols in Pakistan's history — crowds storming the army's corps commander's residence was an event without historical precedent in Pakistan. The military's response was to declare the incidents an act of treason and to begin a systematic crackdown on PTI's leadership, with hundreds of party figures arrested under the Army Act and civilian laws.

Imran Khan was released by court order within days but the 9 May events permanently transformed his relationship with the military establishment. Dozens of PTI leaders defected or resigned under pressure. The party that had been the establishment's creation turned against its creator, and the establishment now sought to undo what it had made.

Economic Crisis: Near Default and IMF Rescue

Through the first half of 2023, Pakistan teetered on the edge of sovereign default — unable to meet its external debt obligations as foreign exchange reserves fell to critically low levels, covering barely three weeks of imports. The rupee collapsed — falling from approximately 200 to over 300 against the dollar. Inflation reached 38% — the highest in Pakistan's history — devastating the purchasing power of the middle and lower classes.

The IMF's $3 billion Stand-By Arrangement, agreed in June 2023, provided temporary relief and prevented formal default. But the conditions — further currency depreciation, higher energy tariffs, expanded tax collection, and elimination of subsidies — imposed severe economic pain on ordinary Pakistanis. The combination of record inflation, currency collapse, and IMF austerity was politically devastating for the coalition government.

Elections Delayed: Constitutional Crisis

The National Assembly's term expired in August 2023, requiring elections within 90 days — by November 2023. Instead, the caretaker government appointed after Shahbaz Sharif's government's term exceeded its constitutional mandate, with elections eventually held in February 2024. The delay was attributed to the census completion requirements, but was widely interpreted as allowing additional time to organise PTI's suppression and manage the electoral environment.

Imran Khan, imprisoned since August 2023 on multiple charges, was convicted in multiple cases. The Cipher case, the Iddat case (regarding his marriage to Bushra Bibi), and corruption cases collectively resulted in sentences that disqualified him from contesting elections.

2024 Controversial Elections; Nawaz's Return; PTI's Remarkable Showing

Pakistan's Most Contested Election in Decades

The February 2024 Elections: PTI Wins Without Its Leader

General elections were finally held on 8 February 2024 — delayed from their constitutional deadline and conducted in an atmosphere of intense controversy. PTI, denied its electoral symbol (the cricket bat) by the Election Commission, fielded candidates as independents. Imran Khan remained in prison. Maryam Nawaz Sharif was the PML-N's campaign face in Punjab; Bilawal Bhutto Zardari led the PPP.

The results shocked the political establishment. PTI-backed independents won the largest number of seats — approximately 93 seats — demonstrating that Imran Khan's support base had not evaporated despite his imprisonment, the crackdown on his party, and the suppression of his election symbol. The result was a stunning popular verdict on behalf of a jailed leader whose party had been systematically dismantled.

PML-N won approximately 75 seats. PPP won 54 seats. No party had a majority. The PTI-backed independents, unable to form a government without joining a formal party, were approached but could not agree on a coalition. PML-N and PPP formed a coalition government — setting aside years of bitter rivalry — along with other smaller parties.

Nawaz Sharif's Fourth Return; Shehbaz Sharif Becomes PM Again

Nawaz Sharif had returned to Pakistan in October 2023 after four years of exile in London — his third return from foreign exile. His corruption convictions were overturned by courts in what critics characterised as judicially managed rehabilitation, clearing the way for his party's election campaign.

Following the February 2024 elections, Shahbaz Sharif was again elected Prime Minister — his second term. Nawaz Sharif remained as PML-N leader, working from outside the government while his daughter Maryam Nawaz became Chief Minister of Punjab — the first woman to hold that position.

Asif Ali Zardari — who had served as President 2008-2013 — was elected President again in March 2024, returning to the office fourteen years after his first tenure. Pakistan's political class was recycling itself with a thoroughness that would have seemed improbable in any other democratic system.

Imran Khan's Continued Imprisonment and Legal Battles

Imran Khan remained in prison throughout 2024, contesting multiple cases simultaneously from Rawalpindi's Adiala Jail. His party PTI, despite winning the most seats in the February election, was excluded from government. His supporters maintained that his imprisonment was politically motivated; the government maintained all legal processes were legitimate.

The Supreme Court and various High Courts repeatedly intervened in Imran Khan's cases, granting bail in some, upholding convictions in others, creating a legal labyrinth of extraordinary complexity. International human rights organisations including Amnesty International and the UN Human Rights Commission expressed concern about the fairness of his treatment.

Economic Stabilisation Under Coalition Government

The Shahbaz Sharif coalition government's primary economic task was stabilising the economy after the 2023 crisis. The IMF programme provided a framework; the government implemented painful measures — high electricity tariffs, reduced subsidies, expanded tax collection — that reduced the fiscal deficit but maintained severe pressure on ordinary Pakistanis.

By mid-2024, some economic indicators were improving: inflation was declining from its 38% peak; foreign exchange reserves were rebuilding; and GDP growth was recovering modestly. A new IMF Extended Fund Facility of $7 billion was agreed in July 2024 — another record programme in Pakistan's long history of IMF dependence.

The structural problems remained unchanged: low tax revenue, energy sector circular debt, inadequate investment in education and health, and an export base too narrow to sustain the import needs of a growing economy. Pakistan in 2024 was stabilising rather than developing — managing its crisis rather than addressing its causes.

2025 Pakistan at 78: Where the Nation Stands

Resilient People, Fragile Institutions, Unresolved Questions

The Political Landscape in 2025

As Pakistan entered 2025, its political landscape was defined by deep polarisation between the PTI — whose imprisoned leader remained a unifying symbol for millions of supporters — and the PML-N/PPP coalition government that ruled with military support but limited popular enthusiasm. Elections that many considered to have been manipulated had produced a parliament that did not reflect the electorate's expressed preferences.

Imran Khan's continued imprisonment was the central political fact of the moment. Various court proceedings — some resulting in bail orders, others in conviction — created a legal situation of almost surreal complexity. The military's determination to keep Imran out of politics and the courts' oscillating decisions produced a legal circus that damaged every institution's credibility.

Maryam Nawaz's tenure as Punjab Chief Minister represented a significant generational transition in PML-N. Her governance approach — populist infrastructure projects, social media engagement, and assertive political communication — marked a contrast with her father's more patrician style. Whether this represented genuine political renewal or simply new packaging for the same patronage politics remained to be seen.

The Economy: Stabilisation Without Transformation

Pakistan's economy in 2025 was recovering from the acute crisis of 2022-23 but remained structurally fragile. GDP growth was approaching 3-4% — better than the crisis years but below what was needed to absorb a growing labour force or reduce unemployment meaningfully. Inflation had declined significantly from its 2023 peak but remained elevated, eroding purchasing power.

The tax-to-GDP ratio was improving incrementally — approaching 10% for the first time — but still far below the 15-20% needed to fund adequate public services without perpetual debt dependence. The energy sector remained dysfunctional: electricity was expensive, load-shedding persisted in many areas, and the circular debt was still accumulating.

CPEC's promised transformation had been partially delivered: Pakistan had significantly more electricity generating capacity than in 2015, roads had improved, and Gwadar port was functioning. But the expected industrialisation — Pakistan becoming a manufacturing hub for goods transiting to China — had not materialised. The corridor was carrying less commercial traffic than anticipated. The debt repayment obligations to China were creating a new external debt pressure.

Security: Persistent Challenges in KP and Balochistan

Pakistan's security situation in 2025 remained challenging. TTP attacks in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa — particularly in the districts bordering Afghanistan — were a persistent threat. Military operations continued but could not eliminate an organisation with sanctuary across the border in Taliban-governed Afghanistan.

Balochistan's insurgency continued at a low but sustained level. Enforced disappearances — which the Supreme Court periodically addressed but security services continued — remained a source of deep Baloch grievance. CPEC infrastructure attacks by nationalist groups complicated the project's implementation.

Pakistan's relationship with Afghanistan remained fraught. The Taliban government in Kabul refused to hand over TTP commanders, insisting that Afghan soil would not be used against its neighbours while demonstrably failing to enforce this commitment. Pakistan's border fencing — partially completed — reduced but did not eliminate cross-border militant movement.

Society: Change, Continuity, and the Digital Generation

Pakistan's population of approximately 240 million in 2025 was predominantly young — a median age below 23 — and increasingly urban. The digital revolution had transformed everyday life: over 100 million internet users, widespread social media, mobile banking reaching previously unbanked populations, and an online economy growing rapidly.

Women's participation in public life had expanded substantially. Female literacy had reached approximately 52% nationally — still below male literacy but dramatically higher than previous decades. Women's university enrolment, professional employment, and political representation were all at historically high levels. Maryam Nawaz as Punjab Chief Minister was the most prominent symbol of this shift.

Yet deep structural inequalities persisted. The poorest 20% of the population remained in extreme poverty. Rural-urban divides in education, health, and economic opportunity were stark. Climate change — manifested in Pakistan through devastating floods, glacial lake outbursts, and extreme heat events — was imposing increasing costs on the most vulnerable communities who had contributed least to global emissions.

Pakistan and the World: Managing Multiple Relationships

Pakistan's foreign policy in 2025 was navigating an increasingly complex multipolar world. The United States remained important — militarily, economically, and as the home of a large and influential diaspora — but the relationship had lost the strategic intensity of the Cold War and War on Terror eras. China had become Pakistan's most important economic partner and strategic ally.

Relations with India remained frozen in familiar patterns: no trade, no cricket, no substantive dialogue. The Modi government showed no interest in normalising relations while cross-border terrorism continued; Pakistan showed no willingness to take the comprehensive action against militant groups that India required as a precondition for dialogue. The nuclear-armed standoff that had defined the relationship since 1998 continued, managed but not resolved.

The Gulf relationships — Saudi Arabia, UAE, Qatar — remained essential sources of remittances, investment, and diplomatic support. The millions of Pakistani workers in the Gulf were the single most important economic contribution to Pakistan's foreign exchange stability. Their welfare, and the continuation of Gulf employment, was a permanent priority of Pakistani diplomacy.

Pakistan in 2025: Statistical Snapshot

Population: ~240 million (world's 5th largest) | PM: Shahbaz Sharif (2nd term) | President: Asif Ali Zardari (2nd term) | GDP growth: ~3-4% (recovering from 2023 crisis) | Inflation: declining from 38% 2023 peak | IMF programme: $7 billion EFF (July 2024) | Internet users: 100+ million | Mobile subscribers: 190+ million | Nuclear warheads (estimated): 160-170 | Imran Khan: imprisoned, PTI excluded from government

Pakistan 2015–2025: The Recurring Patterns of Seven Decades

What the Final Volume Reveals About Pakistan's Enduring Challenges

The Civil-Military Cycle: Permanent Subordination

The decade 2015-2025 completed another full cycle of the civil-military relationship that has defined Pakistani politics since 1947. An elected government rises — sometimes with establishment support, sometimes despite it. It governs in the shadow of military power. It eventually falls — through dismissal, judicial action, or popular revolt — when it crosses a line the military draws. A new government rises.

The specific actors change across decades: Liaquat, Bhutto, Benazir, Nawaz, Imran — each represented as a unique political phenomenon but each ultimately constrained by the same structural reality. The military's institutional interests — budget, promotions, strategic policy autonomy — are non-negotiable. Prime Ministers who accept this reality survive longer; those who challenge it are removed.

The 2015-2025 decade added one new element: the social media generation. Imran Khan's imprisonment generated a level of popular mobilisation, online resistance, and sustained political engagement that no previous removed leader had commanded. The digital public sphere made suppression of political information more difficult than it had been in the Bhutto or Nawaz eras. Whether this changes the fundamental civil-military equation remains to be seen.

The Economic Treadmill: Growth Without Development

Pakistan's economic performance across seven decades reveals a pattern of periodic growth spurts — Ayub's 1960s, Zia's 1980s, Musharraf's 2000s, and the post-2013 CPEC years — each followed by fiscal crisis, currency depreciation, and IMF bailout. The fundamental problems — low tax collection, energy sector dysfunction, inadequate investment in human development — recur in each cycle.

By 2025, Pakistan had been through fourteen IMF programmes. Each programme addressed the symptoms of the fiscal crisis — the deficit, the reserves, the exchange rate — without curing the disease: a political economy in which the wealthy avoid taxation, the energy sector is managed for political rather than commercial purposes, and investment in education and health is consistently sacrificed to debt servicing and defence spending.

The Democratic Promise Deferred: But Not Extinguished

Pakistan's democratic journey since 1947 is a story of repeated disappointment — four military coups, dozens of dismissed governments, judicial removal of elected Prime Ministers, and the persistent subordination of civilian to military authority. Yet the democratic impulse has not been extinguished.

Pakistanis vote in enormous numbers when given the opportunity. They take to the streets — for Bhutto, for Benazir, for the lawyers' movement, for Imran Khan — when they feel their political choices are being stolen. Civil society — lawyers, journalists, women's organisations, human rights defenders — maintains a tradition of principled resistance that each generation renews.

The 2015-2025 decade, for all its chaos, produced the first civilian-to-civilian power transfer in 2013 (maintained through 2023 when another transition occurred). It produced the 18th Amendment's genuine federalism. It produced a media environment — however imperfect — that held governments to account in ways impossible under earlier eras. These are real, if fragile, advances.

The Imran Khan Phenomenon: Rise, Rule, and Resistance

Understanding Pakistan's Most Polarising Political Figure Since Bhutto

Imran Khan's Political Identity

Imran Khan's political journey — from cricket hero to Prime Minister to imprisoned opposition leader — is unlike anything in Pakistan's political history. No previous Pakistani politician combined his international celebrity, his genuine moral credibility (earned through the Shaukat Khanum hospital), his mass appeal to the young and urban, and his confrontational willingness to directly name the military establishment as his oppressor.

Imran Khan's ideology was never precisely defined but drew on several traditions: Islamic welfare state models (his frequent invocation of Medina's governance); anti-corruption populism; Pakistani nationalism with a strong anti-American and anti-Indian dimension; and a meritocratic vision that rejected the dynastic politics of both the Bhutto and Sharif families.

His governing record (2018-2022) was mixed: genuine achievements in social protection (Ehsaas), health insurance (Sehat Sahulat), and afforestation; significant failures in economic management, inflation control, and institutional governance. The economy he inherited was in crisis partly through his predecessors' failures, but his government's handling of it was erratic and often counterproductive.

The PTI's Social Base: Pakistan's Digital Generation

PTI's support base was distinctive in Pakistani political history. Unlike the PPP's rural-poor and Sindhi base, or PML-N's Punjab business-class and Biraderi networks, PTI was strongest among the urban middle class, diaspora Pakistanis, young first-time voters, and the social media generation.

This base was organised differently from traditional Pakistani politics: PTI used social media — Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp groups — rather than feudal patron-client networks to mobilise support. Its overseas Pakistani supporters donated money, created content, and amplified messaging in ways that gave the party an unprecedented digital infrastructure.

After Imran's imprisonment, this social media infrastructure became a resistance network. PTI supporters created and distributed content, organised protests, and maintained political communication in the face of a systematic state crackdown that arrested party leaders, raided offices, and pressured media not to cover PTI sympathetically. The digital resistance was imperfect but real.

Why the Establishment Turned Against Imran Khan

The military establishment's reversal from PTI's enabler to its suppressor was one of the decade's defining political developments. The reasons were multiple and contested. Imran Khan's own account — that he was removed for refusing to accept an American demand conveyed through the 'cipher' — was the narrative his supporters accepted. Alternative explanations included his clashes with the ISI chief over appointments, his management of the economy, his foreign policy of closer Russia relations (visiting Moscow the day before Russia invaded Ukraine), and his increasing personalisation of authority.

Most likely, the estrangement was cumulative — a series of conflicts over the military's institutional prerogatives that collectively convinced the establishment that Imran was ungovernable. The calculation that the same establishment had made about Nawaz Sharif in 2017 was made about Imran in 2022: that the costs of maintaining this particular Prime Minister exceeded the benefits.

Climate Change and Pakistan: The Front Line of a Global Crisis

A Country That Emits Less Than 1% But Suffers Disproportionately

The 2022 Floods: Climate Change Made Visible

The catastrophic floods of 2022 — which inundated approximately one-third of Pakistan, killed over 1,700 people, displaced 33 million, and caused $30 billion in damages — were the most dramatic manifestation of climate change's impact on Pakistan. Attribution studies linked the severity of the flooding to climate change, which had intensified the monsoon and accelerated glacial melt in Pakistan's northern mountains.

Pakistan has some of the world's highest concentrations of glaciers outside the polar regions — over 7,000 glaciers in the Karakoram, Hindu Kush, and Himalayan ranges. These glaciers are melting at accelerating rates, creating glacial lakes that periodically burst (GLOFs — Glacial Lake Outburst Floods) with devastating effect on downstream communities. Pakistan experienced over 700 GLOFs between 1990 and 2025.

Pakistan's Climate Minister Sherry Rehman made a powerful case at COP27 in November 2022 — held just months after the floods — for climate justice: that countries like Pakistan that had contributed almost nothing to the greenhouse gas accumulation causing climate change were bearing enormous costs. The resulting 'Loss and Damage' fund established at COP27 was a partial acknowledgment of this principle, though the funding amounts pledged were far below what affected countries needed.

Extreme Heat and Water Stress

Alongside flooding, Pakistan faced escalating heat extremes. Jacobabad in Sindh recorded temperatures that exceeded the theoretical limits of human survivability (wet-bulb temperature of 35°C) on multiple occasions between 2021 and 2025. The Indus river basin, which feeds Pakistan's massive irrigation system, was under stress from reduced glacier contribution and changing precipitation patterns.

Agricultural productivity was threatened by a combination of factors: heat stress on crops, irregular rainfall, waterlogging in some areas and drought in others, and the damage from successive flood events. Pakistan's food security — dependent on the Punjab and Sindh breadbaskets — was facing a medium-term threat that the government was ill-equipped to address.

Pakistan's Civil Society 2015-2025: Resistance and Resilience

Lawyers, Journalists, Activists, and the PTM

The Pashtun Tahafuz Movement (PTM)

One of the most significant civil society developments of this decade was the emergence of the Pashtun Tahafuz Movement (PTM) in 2018, founded by Manzoor Pashteen. The PTM articulated the grievances of Pashtun communities in the tribal areas and KP who had suffered military operations, enforced disappearances, the installation of checkpoints that restricted movement, and the laying of landmines that continued to kill civilians years after operations ended.

The PTM's demands were constitutionally modest — habeas corpus for the disappeared, truth commissions for extrajudicial killings, demining of tribal areas — but they challenged the military's conduct in operations that the establishment considered closed matters. PTM leaders were arrested, its gatherings dispersed, and its media coverage suppressed. The movement nonetheless maintained its presence and its moral authority among Pashtun communities.

The PTM represented something new in Pakistani politics: a grassroots civil rights movement from a community that had borne the heaviest military burden of the Afghan war era, organising not around partisan politics but around constitutional rights. Its suppression raised fundamental questions about whether the Pakistani state could accommodate the legitimate political expression of its most war-affected communities.

Press Freedom Under Pressure

Pakistan's press freedom declined significantly through this decade. Freedom House, Reporters Without Borders, and the Committee to Protect Journalists all documented increasing constraints on Pakistani journalism. Journalists critical of the military faced threats, physical attacks, and in some cases enforced disappearances. Television channels were pressured through advertising boycotts — government and corporate advertising withdrawn from channels that were deemed too critical.

Senior journalist Absar Alam was shot in 2017; Zafar Siddiqui and other reporters were abducted briefly; Cyril Almeida, who had broken the Dawn Leaks story, was placed on an exit control list. The systematic nature of the pressure on journalists created a chilling effect — self-censorship on military-related topics became widespread.

Social media partially circumvented traditional media controls — news that Pakistani TV channels would not broadcast spread on Twitter and WhatsApp. But social media also enabled organised harassment campaigns against journalists, with coordinated trolling of reporters who covered sensitive stories.

Women's Rights: Aurat March and Its Controversies

The Aurat (Women's) March — an annual women's rights demonstration first held in 2018 and growing significantly through this period — became a flashpoint in Pakistan's culture wars. The marches, held on 8 March (International Women's Day) in Karachi, Lahore, Islamabad, and other cities, featured participants carrying placards with demands for gender equality, reproductive rights, and an end to domestic violence.

The marches provoked intense controversy — religious conservatives condemned them as un-Islamic and Western-inspired; PTI (initially) and religious parties organised counter-demonstrations. Some placards were deliberately provocative, which gave opponents material to discredit the broader movement. The debates around the Aurat March revealed the depth of the conflict between Pakistani women's aspirations for equal citizenship and the conservative religious and cultural forces that contested those aspirations.

Despite the controversy, the Aurat March demonstrated that Pakistani women were organising more assertively than at any previous point in the country's history, and that the demand for gender equality had a visible, vocal constituency willing to take to the streets.

CPEC 2015-2025: Promise, Delivery, and the China Relationship

The Corridor That Changed Pakistan's Economic and Strategic Landscape

What CPEC Delivered: Energy and Infrastructure

By 2025, CPEC had delivered significant results in its energy component. Approximately 5,000 megawatts of new generating capacity had been added to Pakistan's grid through Chinese-financed power plants. Load-shedding, which had reached catastrophic levels of 18+ hours daily in 2012-13, was reduced to a fraction of that duration in most urban areas. The energy crisis that had been the defining economic problem of the previous decade was substantially addressed.

Road infrastructure improved significantly: the Gwadar-to-Karachi Makran Coastal Highway was upgraded; sections of the Karakoram Highway were widened and improved; and Orange Line metro trains were running in Lahore. Gwadar port, while not yet handling the commercial volumes originally envisioned, was operational as a deep-sea port.

CPEC's Controversies and Limitations

CPEC's limitations and controversies were equally significant. The promised industrialisation — Pakistan becoming a manufacturing hub for goods transiting to and from China — had not materialised on the projected scale. The Special Economic Zones established under CPEC attracted limited investment from Pakistani and Chinese companies.

The debt profile generated by CPEC was a growing concern. Pakistan owed Chinese lenders — primarily China Development Bank and Export-Import Bank of China — billions of dollars in principal and interest. The IMF and Western creditors flagged concerns about debt sustainability and the terms of CPEC agreements, which remained partially opaque.

The 'China-Pakistan friendship' narrative, assiduously cultivated by both governments, masked real tensions: Pakistani businesspeople complained about the preference for Chinese companies in CPEC contracts; Baloch nationalist groups attacked Chinese workers and infrastructure; and the expected technology transfer and skill development that Pakistani negotiators had hoped for lagged well behind expectations.

The Economy 2015-2025: A Decade of Crises and Survival

How Pakistan's Structural Weaknesses Produced Serial Economic Emergencies

The Balance of Payments Trap

Pakistan's recurrent balance of payments crises through this decade — 2017-19, 2022-23 — followed an identical pattern: a period of growth stimulates imports, the current account deficit widens, reserves fall, the currency depreciates sharply, inflation surges, the IMF is called, painful stabilisation follows. Then the cycle restarts.

The underlying cause was Pakistan's inability to grow its export base commensurately with its import needs. Pakistan's exports were dominated by low-value-added textiles — approximately 60% of merchandise exports — that competed on price rather than quality. The diversification into higher-value exports — engineering goods, chemicals, information technology services — was growing but from a very low base.

The IT sector was a genuine bright spot: Pakistan's technology exports grew from under $1 billion in 2015 to approximately $3 billion by 2025, driven by a young, English-speaking technical workforce. Freelancing — Pakistanis providing services to global clients through platforms like Upwork — was a growing source of foreign exchange. But the IT sector was still too small to transform the overall export picture.

Inflation and the Cost of Living Crisis

The inflation peak of 38% in May 2023 was the most acute cost of living crisis in Pakistan's recorded history. Food inflation was even higher — over 50% for staples including flour, cooking oil, and vegetables. The combination of currency depreciation, global commodity price increases, and energy tariff hikes hit ordinary Pakistanis with devastating force.

The social consequences were severe: reduced nutrition, children withdrawn from private schools to save fees, businesses closed, and widespread economic distress across all income groups except the very wealthy. The political consequences were equally severe: the Shahbaz Sharif government, which had inherited an economic crisis and was implementing IMF-required austerity, faced historically low approval ratings.

By 2024-25, inflation was declining as the currency stabilised and global commodity prices moderated. But the purchasing power lost in 2022-23 was not quickly recovered. Pakistan's real wages had declined significantly; middle-class Pakistanis were measurably poorer in 2025 than they had been in 2020.

The IT Sector and Pakistan's Digital Economy

One of the most positive economic developments of this decade was the emergence of Pakistan's technology and IT services sector as a significant and growing contributor to exports and employment. Pakistani software development, data processing, digital marketing, and freelancing services found global markets, generating foreign exchange and providing employment for educated young Pakistanis who might otherwise have emigrated.

Government initiatives — the National Freelancing Programme, technology parks, and e-commerce facilitation — supported the sector's growth. The Startup ecosystem in Lahore, Karachi, and

Islamabad produced hundreds of technology companies, several of which achieved significant valuations. Careem (acquired by Uber), Bykea, and other Pakistani technology companies demonstrated that world-class technology businesses could be built in Pakistan.

The challenge was sustaining growth through Pakistan's recurring economic and political crises. Internet shutdowns — imposed during political unrest, including after the 9 May 2023 violence — disrupted IT services exports and damaged Pakistan's reputation as a reliable technology services destination. Power outages continued to affect productivity. And the attraction of emigration — particularly to the UAE, UK, and Canada — pulled the most talented tech professionals abroad despite growing domestic opportunities.

Religious Extremism 2015-2025: New Forms and Old Patterns

From TTP Violence to TLP Street Power

The TLP: Blasphemy Politics Weaponised

Tehreek-e-Labaik Pakistan (TLP) — the Barelvi Islamist party that had emerged from the movement to defend Mumtaz Qadri, the assassin of Salmaan Taseer — became one of the decade's most consequential political actors through its use of street power. The 2017 Faizabad sit-in that paralysed Islamabad demonstrated the TLP's ability to extract concessions from governments through mob pressure.

The TLP repeated this tactic multiple times through the decade: a 2018 sit-in over the acquittal of Aasia Bibi in the blasphemy case; a 2021 sit-in demanding the expulsion of France's ambassador after Emmanuel Macron defended the publication of cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad. Each time, the government initially resisted then eventually negotiated — a pattern that rewarded extremist street politics and incentivised further use of the same tactic.

The TLP was briefly banned in 2021 after a violent confrontation with police, then unbanned after further negotiations. Its electoral support grew through these years — in the 2024 elections, TLP candidates won seats in Punjab, reflecting a constituency for its Barelvi-Islamist populism that was larger than secular commentators wished to acknowledge.

Sectarian Violence and Minority Persecution Continues

The systematic persecution of Pakistan's minority communities continued through this decade. The Ahmadiyya community faced ongoing criminal prosecutions under the blasphemy laws and Ordinance XX, with periodic attacks on their places of worship and cemeteries. Christians faced blasphemy accusations that triggered mob violence — the burning of Christian homes in Jaranwala (August 2023), where a blasphemy accusation led a mob to attack and burn an entire Christian neighbourhood, was among the worst such incidents in recent decades.

Pakistan's Shia community continued to face targeted assassinations — Hazara Shia in Quetta were killed in bombings and targeted shootings with such frequency that the community conducted periodic sit-ins with coffins in public spaces, refusing to bury the dead until the government promised protection. The government's inability to protect the Hazara community was one of its most shameful and persistent failures.

Pakistan's Regions 2015-2025: Different Paces, Common Challenges

How Punjab, Sindh, KP, Balochistan, and GB Experienced the Decade

Gilgit-Baltistan: The Forgotten Frontier

Gilgit-Baltistan — the spectacular high-altitude territory bordering China, Afghanistan, and Indian-administered Kashmir — occupied a unique constitutional position throughout this period: neither a full province of Pakistan nor a constitutionally defined territory, it was administered under special arrangements that denied its residents the full constitutional rights of Pakistani citizens.

GB's strategic importance was amplified by CPEC — the corridor's main route passed through GB along the Karakoram Highway before entering China at the Khunjerab Pass. Chinese investment in road, tunnel, and infrastructure upgrades transformed GB's connectivity and created economic opportunities alongside concerns about environmental impact on fragile mountain ecosystems.

The climate crisis hit GB with particular force through this period. Glacial lake outburst floods (GLOFs) became more frequent and more destructive, wiping out bridges, roads, agricultural land, and homes in narrow mountain valleys where communities had lived for generations. The Shishper Glacier's recurrent surges damaged the Hassanabad Bridge multiple times. GB's communities were among the most climate-vulnerable on earth.

Sindh: PPP's Fiefdom and Governance Challenges

Sindh province remained under continuous PPP government from 2008 through 2025 — an unbroken seventeen years of provincial governance by a single party. The PPP's dominance in Sindh reflected genuine Bhutto loyalism — particularly in rural areas — and the feudal political economy that the PPP had historically accommodated rather than challenged.

Sindh's governance record was poor on most objective measures. Despite significant federal transfers and its own revenue base from Karachi, the province's social indicators — literacy, infant mortality, access to clean water — were among the worst in Pakistan. Ghost schools and ghost health workers — civil servants drawing salaries for positions that existed only on paper — persisted despite repeated reform commitments.

Karachi, the province's commercial heart, generated enormous revenues for the federal and provincial governments while receiving inadequate service provision and infrastructure investment. The city's Korangi and Lyari industrial areas, its transport infrastructure, and its water supply were all deteriorating relative to the demands of a city whose population had grown to 15+ million.

Pakistan at 78: Seven Decades of History — Key Lessons

What Pakistan's History from 1947 to 2025 Teaches

Lesson One: Democracy Cannot Be Installed From Above

The most persistent lesson of Pakistan's history is that democracy requires not just elections but the institutions, norms, and culture that make elections meaningful. Pakistan has held many elections; it has rarely had genuine democratic governance. The gap between electoral form and democratic substance has been exploited by every institution — military, judiciary, intelligence services — that found civilian authority inconvenient.

The solution is not the perfection of electoral procedures but the development of political parties with genuine ideological commitments and organisational depth; a judiciary truly independent of political pressure from all directions; a military that accepts constitutional subordination not just in rhetoric but in practice; and a civic culture that holds all of these institutions accountable.

Lesson Two: The Strategic Asset Doctrine Always Backfires

Pakistan's experience with cultivating militant groups as strategic assets — from the Afghan mujahideen to the Afghan Taliban to Kashmir-focused groups — is the clearest illustration in modern history of blowback. Every generation of jihadist infrastructure has turned on its creators. The TTP is the child of the Afghan jihad. The domestic sectarian organisations are the products of Saudi-funded Islamisation. The Taliban who shelter the TTP were created and armed by the ISI.

The strategic asset doctrine persists because it serves short-term institutional interests — giving the military leverage in Afghanistan, a cheap equaliser against Indian conventional superiority, and a budget justification. Its long-term costs — tens of thousands of Pakistani lives, international isolation, stunted development — are real and enormous.

Lesson Three: Economic Development Requires Political Will

Pakistan's economic record across seven decades demonstrates that growth is possible but development — the transformation of living standards, institutions, and human capabilities — requires sustained political will over multiple election cycles. The tax reform, education investment, and energy sector restructuring that Pakistan needs cannot be completed in one government's term.

Pakistan's political system — with its electoral cycles, its civil-military competition, and its perpetual instability — has been structurally incapable of sustaining the multi-decade commitments that development requires. China's rise, South Korea's transformation, and Malaysia's development were all achieved under governments that had sufficient political stability to maintain developmental priorities across decades. Pakistan has never had that stability.

Lesson Four: Pakistan's People Are More Than Its Problems

The overwhelming emphasis in any honest history of Pakistan on institutional failures, political crises, and security disasters risks obscuring a fundamental truth: Pakistan's people are extraordinary. The resilience of ordinary Pakistanis — who rebuild after floods, who educate their children despite failed schools, who create businesses despite impossible regulatory environments,

who maintain communities despite ethnic and sectarian violence — is the country's most underrated asset.

The Edhi Foundation's ambulances, the Shaukat Khanum hospital's cancer treatment, the PTM's peaceful resistance, the Aurat March's demands for dignity, the young software developer in Lahore building a global business, the flood victim who returns to rebuild for the fifth time — these are also Pakistan. The history of failures is real and must be recorded. But the history of the people's resilience is equally real and equally important.

Pakistan's Foreign Policy 2015-2025: Navigating a Shifting World Order

From Sole Superpower to Multipolar — Pakistan Adjusts

The China-Pakistan Strategic Convergence

Pakistan's alignment with China deepened into something approaching comprehensive strategic dependence through this decade. Chinese military equipment — JF-17 fighters, Type 54A frigates, HQ-9 air defence systems, tanks, and artillery — became the backbone of Pakistan's armed forces as American supplies became harder to obtain. Chinese training, doctrine, and institutional relationships penetrated the military more deeply than at any previous point.

The CPEC relationship created economic dependence alongside the military partnership. Pakistan's need for Chinese debt rescheduling, Chinese investors to activate Special Economic Zones, and Chinese diplomatic support at the FATF (Financial Action Task Force) gave Beijing substantial leverage over Pakistani policy choices.

Chinese patience with Pakistan's instability — CPEC continued to advance through multiple changes of government, economic crises, and political turmoil — reflected Beijing's long-term strategic commitment to the corridor and to Pakistan's strategic position. The relationship was unequal — China was the vastly more powerful partner — but it was also genuinely supportive in a way that Pakistani-American relations had ceased to be.

The FATF Grey List: International Pressure on Terrorism Financing

Pakistan was placed on the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) grey list in June 2018 — a designation indicating significant deficiencies in combating money laundering and terrorist financing. The grey listing had real consequences: it complicated Pakistan's access to international banking, increased compliance costs for Pakistani financial institutions, and created diplomatic pressure from major trading partners.

Pakistan worked to exit the grey list through a series of legislative and regulatory reforms — strengthening anti-money laundering laws, freezing militant organisations' assets, and prosecuting some financing cases. After four years on the list, Pakistan was removed from the FATF grey list in October 2022 — a significant diplomatic achievement that demonstrated Pakistan could implement international financial standards under sufficient pressure.

The FATF episode illustrated both the effectiveness and the limits of international pressure on Pakistan's militant financing. The pressure produced legislative reforms and some prosecutions. It did not produce the dismantling of militant networks that the reforms were ostensibly designed to achieve.

Pakistan-Afghanistan: Neighbours at War's End

The Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan in August 2021 transformed Pakistan's neighbourhood in ways both hoped-for and feared. The Pakistani military had invested decades in cultivating the Afghan Taliban; now the Taliban governed Afghanistan.

The hoped-for benefits did not materialise. The Taliban government did not expel the TTP; it sheltered TTP commanders and declined to prevent TTP operations against Pakistan. The Afghan Taliban's Islamic Emirate was not the pliable client that the ISI had imagined — it had its own

sovereignty, its own dignity, and its own relationships with groups (including the TTP) that Pakistan wanted it to abandon.

Pakistan periodically launched airstrikes inside Afghanistan against TTP positions — unilateral military action against a neighbouring state that created diplomatic tension and generated Afghan Taliban condemnation. The relationship deteriorated through 2023-25 with multiple border incidents, the Afghan Taliban's expulsion of Pakistani diplomats from some consulates, and the temporary suspension of diplomatic contact.

The Gulf States: Workers, Remittances, and Investment

Pakistan's relationship with the Gulf Cooperation Council states — Saudi Arabia, UAE, Qatar, Kuwait, and Bahrain — remained central to economic survival through this decade. Pakistani workers in the Gulf sent home $20-27 billion annually in remittances — Pakistan's largest source of foreign exchange and the difference between economic stability and collapse in crisis years.

The UAE and Saudi Arabia provided bilateral financial support during Pakistan's balance of payments crises — deferred oil payments, currency swaps, and deposits with the State Bank of Pakistan. This support came with expectations of policy alignment and occasionally with explicit political conditions.

Pakistan's relationship with Saudi Arabia became more complex as Saudi Arabia's regional ambitions — in Yemen, in the competition with Iran, in the restructuring of the Gulf political economy under Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman — created demands for Pakistani military support that Pakistan's parliament and public were sometimes unwilling to meet.

Health and Social Development 2015-2025: Progress and Setbacks

A Decade of Advances Against the Backdrop of Crisis

COVID-19's Legacy: Health System Weaknesses Exposed

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed the structural weaknesses of Pakistan's health system with painful clarity. With just 1.2 hospital beds per 1,000 population (compared to a global average of 2.9), Pakistan's healthcare infrastructure was badly underprepared for a major disease surge. The pandemic's management — the smart lockdown approach, the NCOC (National Command and Operation Centre) coordination mechanism, and the eventual vaccination campaign — showed both the limits and the capabilities of the Pakistani state.

Pakistan's official COVID-19 death toll of approximately 30,000 — lower than comparable countries' — was attributed variously to the smart lockdown's effectiveness, Pakistan's young population, possible prior immunity, and underreporting. The vaccination campaign eventually reached 140 million doses administered — a genuine logistical achievement given Pakistan's infrastructure and the challenges of cold chain maintenance.

The pandemic's economic impact — GDP contraction of 0.5% in 2019-20 — was less severe than in many countries, partly because Pakistan's large informal economy continued to function during the partial lockdown and partly because remittances from the Gulf actually increased as overseas Pakistanis sent more money home during the crisis.

The Sehat Sahulat Health Insurance Programme

One of PTI's genuine policy achievements was the expansion of the Sehat Sahulat (Health Ease) health insurance programme to cover all of Pakistan's population — announced as a goal in 2021 and substantially implemented in KP and Punjab. The programme provided insurance cover of Rs 1 million per family per year for inpatient treatment at empanelled hospitals — both public and private.

The Sehat Sahulat programme addressed a fundamental vulnerability of Pakistan's poor: catastrophic medical expenses. Pakistani families regularly fell into poverty after a major illness because they had no insurance and had to sell assets or borrow to pay for hospital care. The insurance scheme shifted this risk to the state — an important step toward a social protection system worthy of the name.

The programme's expansion was maintained under subsequent governments, reflecting a cross-party consensus that health insurance was both politically popular and socially necessary. Coverage, quality of empanelled facilities, and reimbursement rates all needed improvement, but the programme represented genuine progress in health access.

The Judiciary 2015-2025: From Activism to Controversy

Courts That Made History — for Better and Worse

The Supreme Court Under Multiple Chief Justices

The Pakistani Supreme Court went through significant institutional changes through this decade, with multiple Chief Justices leaving contrasting legacies. Saqib Nisar (2016-2019) pursued an activist agenda — suo motu notices on water scarcity, dam construction (the 'dam fund' campaign), sugar and medicine prices — that critics argued substituted judicial management for administrative policy in areas requiring sustained executive action.

The court's involvement in political cases was consistently controversial. The disqualification of Nawaz Sharif through the Panama Papers case; the complex legal proceedings around Imran Khan's arrest and imprisonment; and the court's oscillating decisions on PTI's electoral symbol in 2023-24 all raised questions about whether the judiciary was applying law consistently or responding to political pressures.

The judges' own internal conflicts — dissenting judgments, public statements, and the extraordinary phenomenon of Supreme Court judges publicly feuding with each other — damaged the court's institutional credibility. A judiciary that appeared divided on political lines was not providing the consistent, impartial adjudication that Pakistan's democratic development required.

The 26th Constitutional Amendment: Judicial Restructuring

In October 2024, the Pakistani parliament passed the 26th Constitutional Amendment — one of the most significant constitutional changes in decades — restructuring Pakistan's superior judiciary. The amendment created a Constitutional Court separate from the Supreme Court to hear constitutional petitions, changed the method of appointing senior judges, and gave parliament a greater role in judicial appointments through a Parliamentary Committee.

The amendment was bitterly opposed by bar associations and legal scholars who argued it was designed to curb the Supreme Court's power after its interventions on behalf of PTI — and that it compromised judicial independence by giving the political executive more influence over judicial appointments.

Supporters argued the amendment addressed genuine problems: the concentration of too much power in the Supreme Court, the need for specialised constitutional adjudication, and the lack of democratic accountability in the appointment of judges who wielded enormous power over the political system.

Enforced Disappearances: An Unresolved Shame

One of Pakistan's most persistent human rights failures through this decade was the continuing practice of enforced disappearances — the detention of individuals by security services without legal process, charges, or acknowledgment of custody. The Commission of Inquiry on Enforced Disappearances, established in 2011, continued to receive thousands of cases annually.

After the 9 May 2023 violence, enforced disappearances expanded significantly as PTI members were detained without formal charges in some cases. Families of PTI workers reported individuals being taken and held without access to lawyers or families — the same pattern that had been

documented in Balochistan for years now appearing in Punjab and KP.

The Supreme Court periodically ordered security agencies to produce 'missing persons', sometimes resulting in their formal arrest and charging, sometimes in their release. But the practice continued because the security agencies that conducted it faced no meaningful legal accountability.

Education in Pakistan 2015-2025: The Stubborn Crisis

Millions Still Out of School; Quality Improving From a Very Low Base

Progress and Persistent Gaps

Pakistan's education indicators improved through this decade — literacy rates rose, school enrolment expanded, and the number of universities increased. Girls' enrolment in primary schools improved significantly in Punjab and urban areas, though gender parity remained elusive in rural Sindh, Balochistan, and FATA.

The Single National Curriculum — introduced under PTI to create a common curriculum across government, private, and madrassa schools — was a significant policy initiative whose implementation was contested. Critics argued the curriculum had a religious nationalist bias; supporters argued it addressed the problem of Pakistan's children learning completely different things in different school systems.

The out-of-school children crisis remained acute: over 20 million children of primary school age were not enrolled by the mid-2020s — one of the largest out-of-school populations in the world. The children most likely to be out of school were girls, poor, rural, and from Balochistan and Sindh. The structural causes — distance from schools, direct and opportunity costs of education, poor quality that made attendance seem pointless — were known but not adequately addressed.

Technology in Education: Promise and Inequality

The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the adoption of digital education tools in Pakistan. Online learning platforms, educational content on YouTube, and teleschools broadcasting educational content to television sets reached some students who could not attend physical classes. The government's teleschool programme during COVID-19 was an imperfect but genuine response to the challenge of maintaining education continuity.

The digital education tools revealed and reinforced existing inequalities: students with smartphones, reliable electricity, and internet access could access online learning; the majority of rural Pakistani children had none of these. The pandemic's education disruption — schools closed for approximately eighteen months in Pakistan — set back the learning of an entire generation of children, with the worst effects on those already most disadvantaged.

Pakistan's Nuclear Doctrine and Regional Security 2015-2025

Deterrence Stable, But the Risks Have Not Diminished

The Full Spectrum Deterrence Doctrine

Pakistan's nuclear doctrine matured through this decade into a 'Full Spectrum Deterrence' posture that explicitly covered the full range of conflicts — from sub-conventional to strategic nuclear. The introduction of the Nasr (Hatf-IX) tactical nuclear weapon, capable of being used on the battlefield against conventional military formations, represented the most significant doctrinal development: Pakistan was explicitly threatening nuclear use if India launched even a limited conventional offensive.

The Pulwama-Balakot crisis of February 2019 demonstrated both the stability and the risks of the South Asian nuclear equilibrium. The crisis escalated to airstrikes and aerial combat between nuclear-armed states before being defused through diplomatic intervention. The nuclear dimension was present throughout — both sides were acutely aware that further escalation risked nuclear use — and the awareness contributed to de-escalation. But the episode showed how quickly a terrorist attack could generate nuclear-adjacent military confrontation.

Pakistan and the International Nuclear Order

Pakistan remained outside the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) throughout this period, maintaining a position of 'strategic restraint' that declined to sign these treaties while also declining to conduct further nuclear tests.

The A.Q. Khan proliferation scandal's legacy continued to affect Pakistan's international standing in nuclear affairs. While Khan himself died in February 2021, the networks he had established and the question of what the Pakistani state had known about his activities remained unresolved in the international community's assessment.

Pakistan's entry into the Nuclear Suppliers Group — which requires NPT membership or equivalent commitments — was blocked by China's willingness to protect Pakistani access to nuclear technology outside NSG constraints. India was admitted to NSG in 2008 through an exceptional waiver; Pakistan's application for similar treatment was rejected, creating what Islamabad regarded as discriminatory treatment between the two South Asian nuclear states.

Pakistani Culture 2015-2025: A Renaissance Amidst Crisis

Film, Music, Drama, and Art Flourish in Difficult Times

The Pakistani Film Revival

Pakistani cinema experienced a genuine revival through this decade after decades of decline. Films like 'Waar' (2013), 'Na Maloom Afraad' (2014), 'Actor in Law' (2016), 'Punjab Nahi Jaungi' (2017), and 'London Nahi Jaunga' (2017) demonstrated that Pakistani filmmakers could produce commercially successful entertainment that connected with domestic audiences across classes and generations.

The revival was driven partly by the reopening of cinemas that had closed during the Taliban period, partly by improved production values, and partly by the blocking of Indian Bollywood films from Pakistani cinemas during periods of India-Pakistan tension — which created market space for domestic films. Pakistani production houses invested in better technical equipment, trained directors and cinematographers, and built connections with the diaspora market.

The streaming era — with Netflix, Amazon Prime, and local platforms — created new distribution channels for Pakistani content, reaching diaspora audiences and international viewers who had previously had no access to Pakistani entertainment. Pakistani dramas found audiences across South Asia, the Middle East, and among diaspora communities worldwide.

Cricket: World Cup Triumph and the T20 Era

Pakistan cricket experienced both triumph and turbulence through this decade. The Pakistan Super League (PSL), launched in 2016, brought international-quality franchise T20 cricket to Pakistani cities — Karachi, Lahore, Multan, Peshawar, and Quetta — that had been bereft of top-level international cricket since the 2009 Lahore attack on the Sri Lankan team.

Pakistan won the ICC Champions Trophy in 2017, defeating arch-rival India in the final at The Oval in London in one of the most dramatic matches in recent cricket history. The team was captained by Sarfaraz Ahmed and featured players like Fakhar Zaman, Hasan Ali, and the returning Mohammad Amir. The victory generated national celebrations comparable to the 1992 World Cup triumph.

Pakistan also won the T20 World Cup in 2009 (held in England) and came close in subsequent editions. The return of international cricket to Pakistan — with teams from England, New Zealand, the West Indies, and eventually India visiting — was a major diplomatic and sporting achievement of this decade, signalling Pakistan's improved security situation.

The Diaspora in the 2015-2025 Decade: Political Force and Economic Pillar

How Overseas Pakistanis Became Central to Both Economy and Politics

Remittances: The Economy's Lifeline

Pakistan's overseas worker remittances grew from approximately $19 billion in 2015 to over $27 billion by 2024, making Pakistan among the world's top remittance-receiving countries. The Gulf states — Saudi Arabia, UAE, Qatar, Kuwait — remained the primary source, but the UK, USA, Canada, and Australia were growing contributors as the diaspora in Western countries became more economically established.

During Pakistan's acute balance of payments crises of 2018-19 and 2022-23, remittances were the single factor most responsible for preventing complete reserve collapse. The State Bank of Pakistan's Roshan Digital Account scheme — allowing overseas Pakistanis to hold and invest in Pakistan through digital accounts with attractive returns — attracted billions in diaspora savings and was one of the decade's more successful financial policy innovations.

The Diaspora as Political Actor

Pakistan's overseas community became an unprecedented political force through this decade — most visibly through their support for Imran Khan and PTI. Overseas Pakistanis, particularly in the UK, USA, and Gulf, donated to PTI campaigns, organised international lobbying, created social media content, and turned out in large numbers at PTI events when Imran Khan visited these countries.

The PTI's ability to fundraise globally — through online campaigns, cryptocurrency, and diaspora events — gave it financial resources that were difficult for the Pakistan government to control or monitor. After Imran's imprisonment, the diaspora became even more central to PTI's operations: coordinating legal campaigns, lobbying governments for intervention, and maintaining the party's international profile.

The political mobilisation of the diaspora created new pressures on host governments. British Pakistani MPs were lobbied to raise Imran Khan's case in Westminster. American Pakistani organisations pressured Congress members. The internationalisation of Pakistani politics — previously conducted primarily domestically — was a genuinely new phenomenon with consequences still being worked out.

Agriculture and Food Security: Climate Stress on Pakistan's Breadbasket

The Foundation of Pakistan's Economy Under Threat

The Green Revolution's Limits and the Climate Challenge

Pakistan's agriculture — which employs approximately 37% of the labour force and contributes about 22% of GDP — faces existential challenges from climate change that compound the long-standing problems of inefficient irrigation, feudal land tenure, and inadequate investment.

The Punjab and Sindh breadbaskets that feed Pakistan's 240 million people and generate export earnings from cotton, rice, and other commodities are experiencing changing rainfall patterns, more frequent heat waves, and increasing salinity from waterlogging. The Indus river's flow — dependent on glacial melt that is accelerating — faces medium-term decline that could threaten the irrigation system that makes Pakistani agriculture possible.

Wheat production — critical for Pakistan's food security and a political barometer given the importance of flour prices to ordinary Pakistanis — experienced shortages in 2022-23 partly due to flood damage and partly due to government policy failures in procurement and storage. Pakistan, historically self-sufficient in wheat, had to import the staple at enormous cost, contributing to the inflation crisis.

Agricultural Policy Failures and the Feudal Question

Pakistan's agricultural sector remained trapped by the same structural problem that had defined it since independence: the feudal land tenure system that concentrated agricultural land in the hands of large landlords (waderas in Sindh, zamindars in Punjab) while the majority of actual cultivators were tenant farmers or landless agricultural labourers.

No government in this decade attempted meaningful land reform. The political class in both PPP and PML-N contained significant numbers of large landowners who had no interest in redistributing their land. The rural poor who might have benefited from reform lacked the political organisation to demand it. The result was an agriculture sector in which investment was low, productivity growth lagged regional peers, and the benefits of agricultural production were captured predominantly by those who owned the land rather than those who farmed it.

The Internet, Social Media, and Pakistan's Information War

How Digital Technology Transformed Politics, Culture, and Conflict

Social Media as Political Battlefield

Pakistan's political landscape was transformed more profoundly by social media in this decade than in any previous period of its history. Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, and WhatsApp became primary arenas of political contest — with organised hashtag campaigns, viral videos, coordinated trolling, and information operations conducted by political parties, the military's ISPR, and foreign actors.

The ISPR's social media operation grew into one of the most sophisticated state information operations in the region — producing high-quality video content, managing narrative around military operations, and responding rapidly to criticism. Civilian political parties developed their own social media operations, with PTI particularly aggressive and effective.

The weaponisation of social media — using disinformation, coordinated amplification, and harassment campaigns against political opponents and journalists — became a defining feature of Pakistani political culture. Female journalists and politicians were particularly targeted with gendered harassment that had real chilling effects on women's participation in public discourse.

Internet Shutdowns and Digital Censorship

Pakistan became one of the world's most frequent users of internet shutdowns as a tool of political control. Mobile internet was shut down during political protests — the PTI long marches of 2022, the 9 May 2023 violence, and multiple other occasions. Twitter (now X) was blocked for extended periods. VPN usage increased dramatically as Pakistanis sought to circumvent restrictions.

The Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA) blocked thousands of websites and applications through this decade — content ranging from pornography (consistently blocked) to political criticism (intermittently blocked) to social media platforms (blocked during specific crises). The legal framework for censorship was expanded through the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA) of 2016 and subsequent amendments that gave authorities broad powers to remove content and prosecute online speech.

Pakistan's Young Population: The Demographic Dividend and Its Conditions

Pakistan's demographic structure — with 64% of the population under 30 years old — represents a potential demographic dividend: a large young workforce that could drive economic growth if adequately educated, employed, and healthy. But demographic dividends are not automatic. They require investment in human capital, job creation, and governance quality that translates population into productivity.

Pakistan's challenge in harvesting its demographic potential was stark. The education system was producing graduates — but of insufficient quality for the knowledge economy. The formal economy was creating jobs — but far fewer than the 2+ million young Pakistanis entering the labour market annually. The informal economy absorbed much of the surplus — through street vending, daily labour, and self-employment — but without the productivity growth that formal employment provides.

The mass emigration of young educated Pakistanis — particularly to the UK, Canada, UAE, and Australia — was both a safety valve and a brain drain. Each skilled emigrant represented years of educational investment that would benefit another country. The push factors — poor governance, political instability, limited professional opportunity — were more powerful than the pull factors keeping talented Pakistanis at home. Reversing this required systemic change that no government had yet delivered.

Conclusion: Pakistan at 78 — The Unfinished Nation

Pakistan's history from its birth in 1947 to the present in 2025 is a story of extraordinary complexity: a country of enormous human potential repeatedly betrayed by its own institutions; of a people resilient and creative in adversity; of a state that has survived threats that would have destroyed less tenacious polities, while failing persistently to deliver the security, justice, and prosperity that its founders promised.

The structural problems identified in this history are not mysteries. Every serious analyst of Pakistan knows what needs to change: the military must accept genuine civilian supremacy; the wealthy must pay their taxes; the education system must be funded adequately and reformed substantively; the energy sector must be managed commercially; the militant organisations that have been cultivated as strategic assets must be genuinely dismantled. The knowing has never been the problem. The doing — which requires political will, institutional capacity, and sustained effort across election cycles — has always eluded Pakistan.

Pakistan in 2025 is a nuclear-armed state of 240 million people, facing a climate crisis, a fiscal crisis, and a political crisis simultaneously, with institutions damaged by decades of manipulation and a population increasingly demanding accountability. The generation that will determine Pakistan's future is young — the median age is below 23 — connected, impatient, and refusing to accept the excuses that their parents' and grandparents' generations were expected to swallow.

Pakistan's history is unfinished. The questions it raises — about civil-military relations, about religious identity and democratic governance, about federal unity and provincial rights, about the place of minorities, about women's equality, about the rights of the poor — are not resolved. They are alive, contested, and shaping the country's present every day. The historian can record; only Pakistan's people can decide.

Appendix: Key Events Timeline 2015–2025

Date	Event
Apr 2015	CPEC formally launched; Xi Jinping visits; $46 billion announced
2015	Military courts and NAP implementation; Karachi operations reduce violence
Apr 2016	Panama Papers released; Sharif family named; political crisis begins
Oct 2016	Dawn Leaks — newspaper reveals civil-military tensions; journalist targeted
Sep 2016	Indian 'surgical strikes' across LoC after Uri attack (19 Indian soldiers killed)
Nov 2017	Faizabad sit-in — TLP blocks Islamabad; govt capitulates after 3 weeks
28 Jul 2017	Supreme Court disqualifies PM Nawaz Sharif in Panama case
Aug 2017	Shahid Khaqan Abbasi becomes PM; Nawaz launched 'Mujhe Kyun Nikala' campaign
25 Jul 2018	General elections — PTI wins 116 seats; PML-N wins 64; PPP 43
18 Aug 2018	Imran Khan sworn in as Prime Minister — 'Naya Pakistan' era begins
Oct 2018	Nawaz Sharif arrested; sentenced in Avenfield case
Jul 2019	Pakistan signs $6 billion IMF Extended Fund Facility — 13th programme
14 Feb 2019	Pulwama suicide bombing — 40 Indian paramilitary killed; JeM blamed
26 Feb 2019	India conducts Balakot airstrikes inside Pakistan — first since 1971
27 Feb 2019	Dogfight over Kashmir; Indian pilot Abhinandan captured then released
5 Aug 2019	India revokes Article 370 — Jammu & Kashmir loses special status
Feb 2020	COVID-19 reaches Pakistan; smart lockdown strategy adopted
2020	Ehsaas Emergency Cash — 12 million families receive Rs 12,000
Oct 2020	PDM (Pakistan Democratic Movement) formed — 11 parties oppose Imran
15 Aug 2021	Taliban capture Kabul — US forces complete withdrawal from Afghanistan
Late 2021	TTP resurges with Afghan sanctuary; attacks in Pakistan increase
10 Apr 2022	No-confidence vote removes Imran Khan — first PM removed this way
Apr 2022	Shahbaz Sharif elected PM; coalition of PML-N, PPP, MQM, JUI-F
Jun-Oct 2022	Catastrophic floods — one-third of Pakistan inundated; 1,700 killed; $30bn damage
Nov 2022	Imran Khan survives assassination attempt (shot in leg) at Wazirabad
9 May 2023	Imran Khan arrested; PTI supporters attack military installations and GHQ
Aug 2023	Imran Khan imprisoned; multiple cases; disqualified from elections
Jun 2023	IMF $3 billion Stand-By Arrangement; rupee reaches 300/dollar
Oct 2023	Nawaz Sharif returns from London exile for 3rd time
8 Feb 2024	General elections — PTI independents win ~93 seats but excluded from power
Mar 2024	Shahbaz Sharif becomes PM again; Asif Zardari elected President again
Jul 2024	New IMF $7 billion Extended Fund Facility — largest in Pakistan's history

Date	Event
2024-25	Pakistan economy stabilising; inflation declining; TTP attacks continuing
2025	Imran Khan in prison; political polarisation at historic high; CPEC advancing

Appendix: Heads of State & Government 2015–2025

Name	Role	Period
Mamnoon Hussain	President	Sep 2013 – Sep 2018
Arif Alvi	President	Sep 2018 – Sep 2023
Asif Ali Zardari	President (2nd term)	Mar 2024 – present
Nawaz Sharif	PM (3rd term)	Jun 2013 – Jul 2017
Shahid Khaqan Abbasi	Prime Minister	Aug 2017 – Jun 2018
Imran Khan	Prime Minister	Aug 2018 – Apr 2022
Shahbaz Sharif	PM (1st term)	Apr 2022 – Aug 2023
Anwaar-ul-Haq Kakar	Caretaker PM	Aug 2023 – Feb 2024
Shahbaz Sharif	PM (2nd term)	Mar 2024 – present

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